



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



MONDAY — 21 MAR 2022

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	03/18 Cities move to cut 'sister' ties to Russia
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/us/russian-government-sister-cities-ukraine.html
GIST	<p>At the height of the Cold War, as the deep chill in diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union persisted, pairs of cities across both countries embraced an idealistic mission: to form cultural and political bonds as “sister cities.” Now, with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in its fourth bloody week, those ties appear to be fraying as never before.</p> <p>Across the United States, governments in cities including Chicago, Dallas and Des Moines have moved to suspend decades-long relationships with Russian sister cities as a statement of condemnation of Russia’s attack.</p> <p>The invasion is “perhaps the greatest challenge between our two countries in more than a half century,” Mayor Franklin Cownie of Des Moines wrote in a letter to the head of administration of the Russian city of Stavropol last week after the City Council unanimously decided to suspend the sister city relationship. “This is an act of unprecedented aggression that we, as two longtime friends, cannot ignore or disregard,” he wrote.</p> <p>Plans in Iowa to send a delegation to Stavropol to celebrate the 30-year anniversary of the relationship in July have been called off.</p> <p>While many sister city partnerships are largely symbolic, the decisions to end or suspend them points to a broader unraveling of ties between the United States and Russia, in which even relationships between private citizens are becoming strained.</p> <p>The collapse of these ties comes as many companies and organizations are halting operations in Russia. Major multinational corporations like McDonald’s and Starbucks have temporarily closed locations across the country. International sports leagues have barred Russian teams from events. An international oncology network announced that it would pull out of all collaborations in Russia.</p> <p>“We all turn on the TV and see pregnant mothers being murdered and civilians losing lives and cities being destroyed,” said Sean Spiller, mayor of Montclair, N.J., who sent a letter to his Russian counterpart in Montclair’s sister city Cherepovets threatening to break the cities’ ties last week.</p> <p>“There is always a value to exchanging ideas — but there’s also a time and a place for that,” Mr. Spiller said. “And I think the time and place is not when your country’s dictator is in a war of aggression against an innocent neighbor.”</p> <p>There are 68 official sister city relationships between U.S. and Russian cities, according to Sister Cities International, a citizen diplomacy nonprofit. In some cities, the relationships have existed largely on paper, with leaders exchanging intermittent letters of support. In others, the partnerships have been more substantive, with city leaders making regular visits, and students, business leaders and doctors participating in exchange programs.</p>

Some sister city partnerships are standing firm.

In a March 7 letter to the mayor of Tallahassee, Fla., Mayor Lauren Poe of Gainesville, Fla., emphasized his commitment to maintaining a sister city relationship with the city of Novorossiysk in Russia, and urged the city of Tallahassee, “in the strongest terms possible,” to do the same with its sister city of Krasnodar.

“We must not hold the families of our sister cities responsible for the actions of a nationalist tyrant,” Mr. Poe wrote. “Rather, we need to strengthen our resolve to build on person-to-person leadership and celebrate citizen diplomacy.” The City Council of Tallahassee voted unanimously two days later to sever its ties with Krasnodar.

Gainesville’s ties to Novorossiysk date to 1982, when Gainesville became among the first cities to launch a sister city relationship with a city in the Soviet Union. Nearly every Gainesville mayor has visited at least once during the leader’s term ever since.

“I kind of liken it to getting married,” said Steve Kalishman, executive director for the Sister City Program of Gainesville, of the commitment made by the two cities. And he would know: He met his wife in Novorossiysk in 1976 while working on a commercial ship transporting grain to the Soviet Union. After getting married and moving to Gainesville, the couple pushed the city to pass a resolution making Novorossiysk its sister city. The two hand-delivered the resolution to the city government in Novorossiysk along with a symbolic large golden skeleton key.

The relationship became one of the few channels of communication between the Soviet Union and the United States at the time.

“Ordinary American and Soviet people could not communicate with each other — you had to book a phone call 24 hours in advance and sit by the phone until it rang,” Mr. Kalishman said. As the threat of nuclear war loomed, he founded an organization called Citizen Diplomacy Initiatives and began fielding calls from city officials across the United States hoping to create channels for communication between the two nations.

In a letter to its members in late February, Sister Cities International [pleaded with city leaders](#) to maintain ties to their Russian counterparts.

“While suspending or ending a sister city relationship to register disapproval of a foreign government’s actions may seem, on the surface, like a positive policy protest action, it has the complete opposite effect — closing a vital and, oftentimes, last channel of communication with vulnerable or isolated populations,” wrote Leroy Allala, president of Sister Cities International.

Cutting off business ties can send a persuasive message, but severing ties among independent citizens does not, he said.

Especially now, as Russians are struggling to overcome digital barricades erected by President Vladimir V. Putin in recent weeks, sister city advocates say these lines of communication are more important than ever.

“Unfortunately, it’s the same reason that it’s important now as it was in the early ’80s,” said Mr. Kalishman, adding, “We’ve sort of reverted back to the Cold War now.”

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HEADLINE	03/18 DOJ expands training to law enforcement
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/us/politics/justice-dept-police-training.html

BATON ROUGE, La. — Attorney General Merrick B. Garland said on Friday that the Justice Department would increase the training and other services it offered to local law enforcement agencies seeking to address policing problems, such as the use of excessive force, officer-involved shootings and police bias.

The revamped program, called the Collaborative Reform Initiative for Technical Assistance, “is designed to transform a law enforcement agency’s operations and its relationship with the community,” Mr. Garland said at a conference in Baton Rouge hosted by the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives.

“But this program is not an enforcement action,” he added. “It is a voluntary opportunity for an agency that knows it needs to make changes, and wants to make changes, to do just that.”

Mr. Garland unveiled the revised program after bipartisan negotiations over policing overhaul legislation [collapsed in Congress](#), leaving the White House to work on an executive order on the issue.

And as the administration tries to balance its promises to address police misconduct with supporting law enforcement amid an increase in violent crime in some cities, the Justice Department has emerged as a key figure.

The agency is investigating police departments in cities such as [Minneapolis](#) and [Louisville](#), Ky. At the same time, it was among several voices [pushing the White House](#) to incorporate more thinking from policing groups in drafting its executive order. The order has not yet been issued.

The initial version of the Collaborative Reform Initiative was introduced during the Obama administration. Under the Trump administration, the attorney general at the time, Jeff Sessions, scaled back certain aspects of it. He said that the program had become too broad and onerous, and he decided that it would no longer audit police departments that participated in such Justice Department programs, focusing instead on helping the police fight violent crime.

The latest iteration of the program, developed over the past several months, includes three initiatives intended to build “collaboration, trust, and legitimacy” between law enforcement agencies and their communities, Mr. Garland said.

One initiative is a center created in 2017 that provides targeted technical assistance on more than 60 topics, such as officer safety and wellness, gun violence reduction and community engagement. Last year, the program worked with 171 law enforcement agencies to create specific plans of action.

The second initiative is also a continuation of an existing program, which helps law enforcement agencies that are grappling with a high-profile event, like a controversial killing of a civilian by a police officer. It offers tools such as after-action reviews, data analysis and recommendations for change.

The program “will be offered as a way for the Justice Department to support your work. Not add to it,” Mr. Garland said.

The third initiative restores and revises a model that Mr. Sessions had scaled back. The program offers in-depth assessments of systemic issues that a police department may face, such as bias in policing or the routine use of excessive force.

This was the “most intensive piece” of the new model, Mr. Garland said, adding that the latest iteration addressed criticisms that had been shared with the Justice Department.

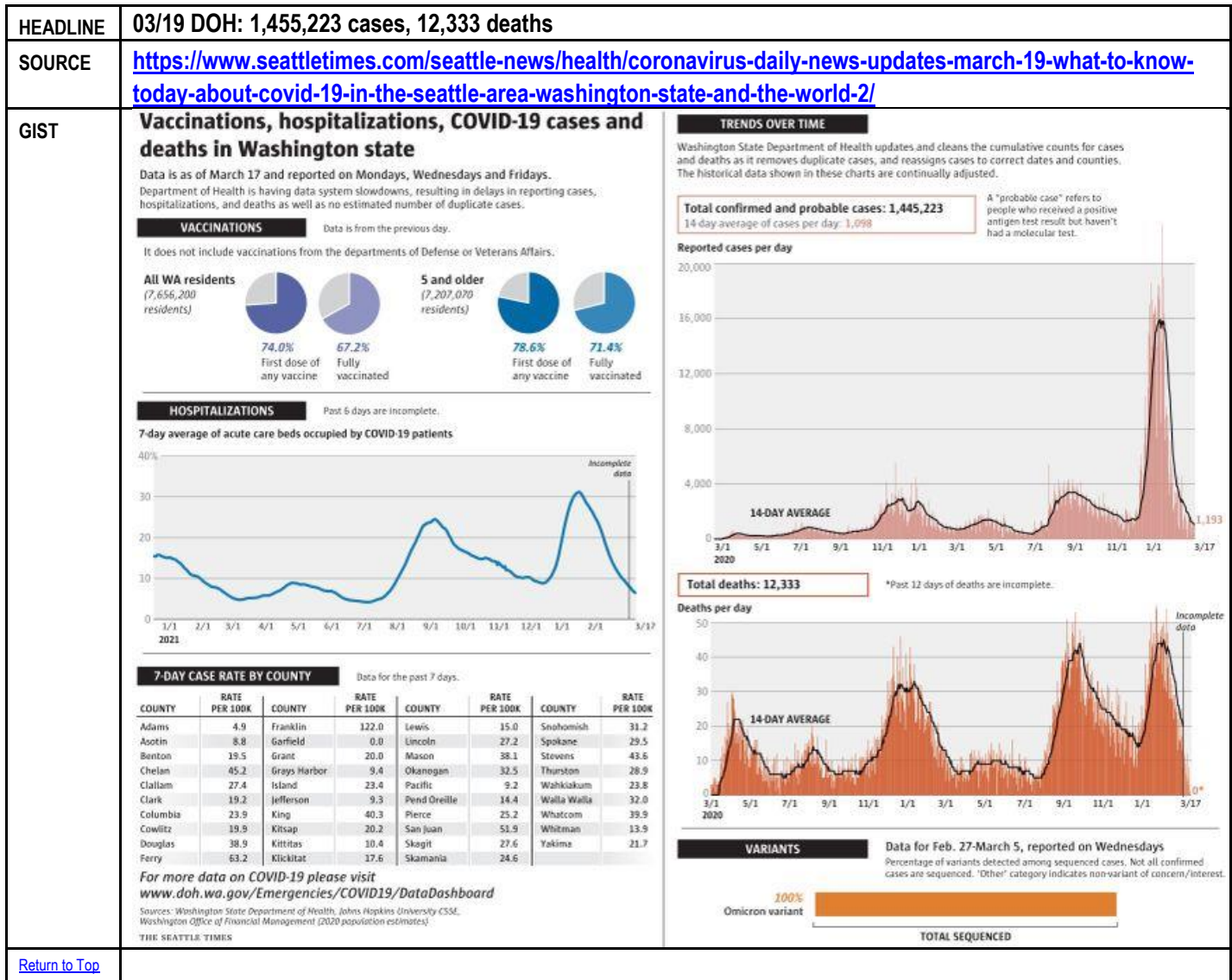
Law enforcement agencies disliked that the Justice Department had focused on creating a comprehensive report at the end of an assessment rather than offering continuing communication and guidance. And they said that many of the recommendations were often difficult to put into practice.

	Now the program will press for improvements “with timely, ongoing and actionable guidance,” Mr. Garland said, and will provide technical assistance so that police departments can “accomplish reforms as they are identified.”
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HEADLINE	03/19 Some states cut back Covid reporting
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/19/us/covid-reporting-states.html
GIST	<p>A growing number of U.S. states have stopped giving daily updates of the number of new coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths, which, combined with the rise of at-home testing whose results are often not officially registered, is creating a more uneven real-time look at the state of the pandemic.</p> <p>While most states still report each weekday, more than a dozen have cut back to once or twice a week, according to a New York Times database. Arizona, Hawaii, Kentucky, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma and South Carolina have moved to weekly reports, as has the District of Columbia. Wyoming has moved to twice-a-week reports. More reductions are expected to come, public health officials have said.</p> <p>Nationally, the declines in new cases, hospitalizations and deaths are tapering off, and some experts are concerned that the drop in reporting could create blind spots if the pandemic begins a resurgence.</p> <p>Many states have recently dropped pandemic restrictions, even as cases surge again in Europe, which has often served as a bellwether for the pandemic’s U.S. trajectory. Though testing has fallen in some countries, detected cases are up globally about 20 percent over the last two weeks, according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>A few states also scaled back their data reporting frequency last summer, just as a wave of new cases from the Delta variant hit. But there are key differences this time, health officials said.</p> <p>“We’ve moved to a place where we don’t need to know the absolute numbers,” said Dr. Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer for the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, which represents the public health agencies of all 50 states, Washington D.C., and U.S. territories. “We can still monitor trends for people who are getting tests in public settings. We still have a good sense of where the absolute numbers are going.”</p> <p>He said that the reduction in reporting would not necessarily mean that states would be less prepared for new waves. Past spikes have come from variants that were discovered and sequenced internationally, including Delta and Omicron. “It was a matter of waiting until they got here,” Dr. Plescia pointed out.</p> <p>The benefits of the daily data reporting has also shifted, according to Dr. Gigi Gronvall, a testing expert and a senior scholar at the Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>“We did see this in June, the attempt to report it more like flu, and it was warranted then,” she said. “In June, cases had dropped, and we did not yet have Delta. We didn’t have much demand for, and didn’t have, rapid antigen tests. Now the government has literally given everyone tests. People who are getting tested who are testing positive are almost certainly not telling their health departments. So the data is pretty wonky.”</p> <p>She said that other indicators are more valuable at this point, like hospitalization and vaccination numbers and wastewater surveillance.</p> <p>Dr. Plescia agreed, saying it was the right time to bring Covid reporting more in line with how public health agencies track other infectious diseases. He said that the result would be a more complete picture of the coronavirus’s trajectory because there would be more time to iron out the fluctuations of daily data. In fact, the daily data “does not necessarily influence the interventions that we’re considering,” he said. However, some researchers warned that the drawdown of state reporting on pandemic metrics presented a threat to response times.</p>

“Infectious diseases like SARS-CoV-2 move very quickly, and therefore we need to respond quickly to early signals of rising cases or a new variant,” said Dr. Sam Scarpino, managing director of pathogen surveillance at the Rockefeller Foundation’s Pandemic Prevention Institute. “Early action prevents school closures, mask mandates and saves lives. However, if we’re waiting around for days or weeks, or months for new data, it’s hard to see the signals quickly enough.”

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HEADLINE	03/19 Millions still haven't gotten Covid shots
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/millions-still-havent-gotten-covid-shots-what-does-that-mean-for-the-future-of-the-vaccination-effort/
GIST	<p>PHILADELPHIA — It's 2 p.m. on a Wednesday in Chester, Pennsylvania, and nurses Susan Pollock and Carol Von Colln are inside a Delaware County vaccine clinic doing what they spend a lot of time doing these days: waiting.</p> <p>Last spring, Americans were in a frenzied rush to get the COVID-19 vaccine; this spring, business has slowed to a crawl. Now, whenever someone walks in, "we're ready to throw a party," Von Colln said.</p> <p>That day, they vaccinated eight people in six hours.</p>

It's a scene playing out across the region and the United States as the number of shots being given each day is at an all-time low — even though a third of Americans are still unvaccinated.

With the omicron surge in the rearview mirror, “there’s a sense of ‘Hey, we’re OK; maybe I don’t need [the shot],” said Chet Patel, pharmacist at Lititz Apothecary in Lancaster County.

The swift post-surge shift in the pandemic landscape — mask mandates and other restrictions lifted, state and federal leaders declaring it time to move forward — has worsened the already-declining demand for shots, doctors and vaccine providers say.

The slowdown raises questions about where the vaccine effort goes from here, how long resources should be spent on outreach, and whether the strategies of the last year are still effective in persuading the unvaccinated, who are at higher risk of severe illness, hospitalization, or death from COVID. It comes as experts urge preparedness for the next surge and, after funding plans last week collapsed in Congress, the future of the national coronavirus response is uncertain.

“The hope a year ago that we could vaccinate enough people that we will reach herd immunity and the virus will go away is now fantasy,” said Bob Wachter, chair of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco. “We shouldn’t give up on vaccination — it remains an important part of the strategy — but it no longer is the dominant thing to focus on to the exclusion of other things.”

With 65% of the total population and 69% of those over 5 fully vaccinated, the national vaccination rate is close to the 70% minimum goal that some public health experts named at the start of the rollout. But there was hope the national rate would reach a higher level than it has before plateauing, said Bill Moss, executive director of the International Vaccine Access Center at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

In Pennsylvania, over the last week, about 9,000 people a day were getting shots on average; until last month, the level had never fallen below about 20,000 shots a day. Similar trends are occurring in New Jersey and nationwide.

“If we do 10 a day, we’re lucky,” said Jon Moran, a Philadelphia health department coordinator, as he helped set up the city’s East Germantown vaccine clinic at Waterview Recreation Center last week. “I think that really reflects the change in policy that’s going on.”

In Philadelphia, the “All Clear” lifting of restrictions took away any “real motivation” for people on the fence, said Ala Stanford, founder of the Black Doctors COVID-19 Consortium. She and others are now concerned that, with a false sense of security, people won’t get vaccinated until the next surge.

That would be too late. Many epidemiologists and doctors agree that the pandemic is not yet endemic, despite political leaders’ declarations. The vaccine provides the best protection against severe illness and death from COVID — and immunizations now can help both prevent surges and protect people against them.

That includes for those who contracted omicron, because it’s unknown how long natural immunity will last. Vaccine immunity wanes over time, too, so many experts are additionally concerned about the low rates of booster shots — only 44% of vaccinated Americans have gotten one.

Also still in flux: the yet-to-be-approved vaccine for children under 5, whether a fourth-dose booster shot will be needed, and how much higher the particularly lagging rates of pediatric vaccines can be raised.

“Vaccination is the foundation of our being protected against future surges of COVID,” said Megan Ranney, emergency physician and academic dean at the Brown University School of Public Health. “As much as we are in a lovely moment of the pandemic right now, we are fooling ourselves if we think that COVID is not sticking around.”

In Potter County, just over a third of residents have been fully vaccinated, nearly the worst rate in Pennsylvania. Providers there like the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Cole hospital are still offering shots and distributing doses to clinics, schools, and rural health centers, but demand is simply low.

Of Pennsylvania's total population, 67% are fully vaccinated, according to the CDC. In about half of Pennsylvania counties, however, it's less than 60% of residents. New Jersey stands at 75%, among the states with the best rates, but even there, certain areas are under-vaccinated.

"We've kind of asked ourselves, What else can we do?" said Jennifer Scheible, director of quality management for UPMC Cole. "It's hard to know what would work."

With few truly new strategies left, the current future of the vaccination campaign resembles the past — community-based canvassing, pop-up clinics, and social media campaigns.

Some experts and providers believe the prospects for encouraging many of the 31 million unvaccinated adults to get the shot are dim, noting they have been unmoved by incentives, mandates, outreach, or science and often influenced by misinformation or politics.

Only 4% of unvaccinated people said they would "wait and see" about getting the shot in a February Kaiser Family Foundation poll, down from 22% a year earlier, indicating most may have made up their minds.

"The term I prefer is vaccine denialist," said Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and a member of the FDA Vaccine Advisory Committee. "They're not hesitant — they're not getting it."

Others believe enough people can still be persuaded to make continued outreach worth it. Ranney is seeing patients change their minds in her emergency room every week.

"This is the worst time to give up on discussions using trusted messengers," she said.

Officials in places like Cumberland County, N.J., and Delaware County see momentum left in these grassroots-type efforts. Philadelphia and Montgomery County plan to eventually close their mass clinics in favor of smaller sites. More burden may also fall on doctors to make headway with patients who haven't sought out the vaccine.

Experts say putting resources toward other measures is also key: increased testing availability, accessible treatment, surveillance of new variants, improved ventilation. Strategies like those are included in President Joe Biden's recent pandemic plan and were laid out in a road map of recommendations from a group of experts. They pushed the administration to go further on some steps, including vaccination, recommending 85% of Americans be immunized by the end of 2022.

The experts said the Biden administration should do zip code analyses to determine what areas are under-vaccinated, use community-level teams to do outreach, and fund efforts to improve vaccinations in certain nursing homes.

"The more we vaccinate," said Mayo Clinic infectious disease specialist Priya Sampathkumar, "the closer we come to ending the pandemic without more loss of life."

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HEADLINE	03/21 NATO looks to its weakest link
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-may-not-stop-with-ukraine-nato-looks-its-weakest-link-2022-03-21/

ON BOARD THE SUPPLY SHIP ELBE, Latvia, March 21 (Reuters) - Hours after Russian missiles first struck Ukrainian cities on Feb. 24, German naval commander Terje Schmitt-Eliassen received notice to sail five warships under his command to the former Soviet Republic of Latvia to help protect the most vulnerable part of NATO's eastern flank.

The hasty dispatch was part of Germany's scramble to send "everything that can swim out to sea," as the navy's top boss phrased it, to defend an area military strategists have long deemed the weakest point for the alliance. The vessels' sudden departure demonstrated how NATO, and Germany, were propelled by Russia's invasion into a new reality and face what officials, diplomats, intelligence officials and security sources agree is the most serious threat to the alliance's collective security since the Cold War.

Schmitt-Eliassen, who is based in the German Baltic port of Kiel, spoke to Reuters on the flight deck of the supply ship Elbe. Moored next to it, within sight of the church towers of the Latvian capital Riga, were a Latvian and a Lithuanian ship, and vessels and sailors from nations including Denmark, Belgium and Estonia were due to join the group later.

A total of 12 NATO warships with some 600 sailors on board are due to start a mine-clearing operation in the coming days.

On Feb. 16, when intelligence showed an invasion was imminent, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called the current era a "new normal."

It looks a lot like a return to the past. Founded in 1949 to defend against the Soviet threat, the NATO alliance is facing a return to mechanised warfare, a huge increase in defence spending, and potentially a new Iron Curtain falling across Europe. After struggling to find a new post-Cold War role, countering terrorism following the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States in 2001 and a humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, NATO is back defending against its original nemesis.

But there's a difference. China, which split with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, has refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which Moscow calls a "special military operation." And the old Cold War blueprints no longer work, as NATO has expanded east since the 1990s, bringing in former Soviet states – including the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in 2004.

In early February, China and Russia issued a powerful joint statement rejecting NATO's expansion in Europe and challenging the Western-led international order.

Direct confrontation between NATO and Russia could touch off a global conflict.

"We have reached a turning point," said retired German general Hans-Lothar Domroese, who led one of the highest NATO commands in the Dutch town of Brunssum until 2016.

"We have China and Russia acting in concert now, boldly challenging the United States for global leadership ... In the past, we have been saying deterrence works. Now we have to ask ourselves: Is deterrence enough?"

This is underscored by Schmitt-Eliassen's mission – a regular exercise that was brought forward by Russia's invasion.

The issue is access. Before the Soviet Union was dissolved, NATO could have moved to contain the Soviet Union by blocking the western entrance of the Baltic Sea. That would seal in the Soviet Union's Baltic Fleet to prevent it from reaching the North Sea where its warships could attack U.S. supply convoys.

Today, NATO's and Russia's roles have been reversed: An emboldened Moscow could encircle NATO's new Baltic members, and cut them off from the alliance. If a new Iron Curtain is to fall, NATO needs to ensure its members are not behind it...

The three tiny countries, with a combined population of some six million people, have a single overland link to the alliance's main territory. A corridor of some 65 km (40 miles) is squeezed between the heavily armed Russian exclave of Kaliningrad on the west and Belarus on the east.

So Schmitt-Eliassen's goal is to keep the waterway open, as a supply line also for non-NATO states Finland and Sweden. Millions of tons of old mines, ammunition and chemical weapons are believed to lie on the bed of the shallow Baltic Sea, a legacy of two World Wars.

Mines – whether old and unexploded or freshly laid – can have an impact beyond destruction, Schmitt-Eliassen said. A mine sighting, or rumoured sighting, can close harbours for days while the area is swept. If that happens in the Baltic, there's a risk "the supermarket shelves will remain empty."

Even commercial ships can become a military factor in the narrow western entrance to the Baltic, he said, referring to scenarios such as the March 2021 incident when the Ever Given container ship blocked traffic through the Suez Canal for days.

"You cannot blame anybody for this (kind of incident), it is not attributable," the chief of the German navy, vice-admiral Jan Christian Kaack, told Reuters.

NEXT TARGET?

Crucial for the Baltics is the land link between Kaliningrad and Belarus. Called the Suwalki Gap, its seizure would cut the Baltic states off.

"Putin could quickly seize the Suwalki Gap," said Domroese, the retired German general, adding this will not happen today or tomorrow, "but it could happen in a few years."

Putin's recent actions have not all been predictable. He put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert on Feb. 28, with rhetoric that Stoltenberg told Reuters is "dangerous, it's reckless."

The Kremlin did not respond to a request for comment. Putin says Russia's concerns expressed over three decades about NATO's expansion were dismissed by the West, and post-Soviet Russia was humiliated after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union.

He says NATO, as an instrument of the United States, was building up its military on Ukraine's territory in a way that threatened Russia.

On March 11, Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu told Putin the West was beefing up military forces close to Russia's Western borders. Putin asked Shoigu to prepare a report on how to respond.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelinskiy has warned that the Baltic states will be Russia's next target. The Baltic Sea is a large and busy shipping market for containers and other cargo, connecting Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Russia with the rest of the world.

It "has gone from being a normal peaceful area, to an area where you tread carefully," said Peter Sand, chief analyst at the air and ocean freight rate benchmarking platform Xeneta. With demand and logistics disrupted, the fees shippers pay to move cargoes from Hamburg to Saint Petersburg and Kaliningrad are down 15% since the invasion, according to Xeneta data.

For almost 25 years, the West believed Russia could be tamed by diplomacy and trade to maintain stability and security in Europe. In 1997, NATO and Russia signed a "founding act" that was designed to build trust and limit both sides' force presence in eastern Europe.

The alliance also sought to build a partnership with Russia, which took part in NATO exercises in the Baltic as recently as 2012, according to retired U.S. Admiral James Foggo, who commanded U.S. and NATO fleets in Europe for almost a decade until 2020.

After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, NATO created small, multinational combat units in Poland and the three Baltic states, which serve as a forward presence to deter Moscow. But the force numbers are designed not to violate the "founding act," which has hindered NATO's ability to move troops into the Baltics and Poland on a permanent basis.

"We all thought that there wouldn't be an enemy anymore," Admiral Rob Bauer, the chairman of NATO's military committee, told Reuters. "We now are confronted with a nation that is showing that it is aggressive, that it has forces that we thought were not going to be used anymore."

While the numbers are changing all the time, the number of troops under the command of NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) Tod Wolters has more than doubled since Russia's invasion, to around 40,000, according to NATO diplomats and officials.

NATO allies have also moved five aircraft carriers into European waters, in Norway and the Mediterranean, increased the number of warplanes in the air in NATO airspace and more than doubled the size of the combat units in the Baltics and Poland. Host nation forces number some 290,000 in the region, but mainly under national control.

GERMANY'S MOMENT

The biggest shift in NATO's "new normal," diplomats, former officials and experts say, is Germany's reversal of a decades-long policy of low defence spending. Held back by guilt over its wartime past and resulting pacifism among its population, Germany resisted pressure from the United States to increase this to a NATO target of 2% of economic output. France and Britain both meet the goal, but Germany's defence spending was only 1.5% in 2021.

With ageing equipment and personnel shortages, Berlin had been seen for decades as a weak partner because of its reluctance to send troops to combat operations.

But on Feb. 27, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Berlin would now meet the 2% target - and promised a 100 billion euros (\$110 billion) injection into the military.

Germany has been concerned by Moscow's presence in the Baltic Sea for a while. After Russia's annexation of Crimea, Berlin forged an alliance of the western navies on the Baltic Sea.

"We simply had to take note of the fact that - whether we like it or not - we are the 900 pound gorilla in the ring," said navy chief Kaack. "The way we look up to the United States as a smaller partner, that's how our partners here look at us."

Soon after Russia's invasion, Berlin announced it would buy 35 Lockheed Martin F-35 fighter jets from the United States to replace its ageing Tornado fleet.

NO MORE CONSTRAINTS

The United States is also moving more military equipment into Europe, including vehicles and weapons to Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Poland that could be used immediately by newly arriving U.S. troops, rather than waiting weeks for tanks and trucks to be shipped from U.S. bases.

Douglas Lute, a former U.S. ambassador to NATO, told Reuters that NATO's "new normal" should be a step up from what the alliance agreed after Crimea. It is likely to be set down in writing in NATO's official master strategy document, known as its "Strategic Concept," which will be agreed at the next NATO summit in Madrid in June.

	<p>"You'll see a push forward of combat capability to both reassure eastern allies and to make an even more prominent deterrence message to Russia," Lute said.</p> <p>He said NATO's existing multinational combat units in the Baltics and Poland – originally some 5,000 troops in total - should be significantly increased in size. He said he expected "more sophisticated air defence systems postured forward," including Patriot and other systems in the Baltics and Poland.</p> <p>And he expects more U.S. weapons and military equipment to be pre-positioned in Europe. More NATO troops could be stationed in Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Hungary.</p> <p>The U.S. delegation to NATO declined to comment. Its envoy, Julianne Smith, said on March 15 the alliance was making commitments to "have more force posture in Central and Eastern Europe and develop new policy tools."</p> <p>But – just as in the Cold War – NATO will need to keep communicating with Russia to avoid risking accidents with potentially devastating consequences.</p> <p>"NATO has some responsibility to do more than just trying to keep Russia out," said Adam Thomson, a former British ambassador to NATO and now director of the European Leadership Network think tank in London. "It's about the management of an unavoidable strategic instability."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Higher food prices, more seek food banks
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/higher-food-prices-pushing-more-low-income-americans-back-to-food-banks/ar-AAVjvFw
GIST	<p>For Chelsi Lewis, things started getting tight again in December. She found herself carving a little from the money budgeted for the electricity bill toward buying groceries. She wondered how she was going to fill her tank to take her high school twins to their track meets and jobs.</p> <p>The tighter times began when the child tax credit expired, said Lewis, 48, a Rockville, Md., single mother of three and full-time student at Bowie State University. She still gets food stamp SNAP benefits of \$800 per month, but that lasts about three weeks. She also used to get enhanced unemployment, after losing her seasonal UPS job during the pandemic, as well as pandemic-EBT to supplement school meals, but both expired.</p> <p>"I've been winging it," said Lewis, who is studying history. "There are some nights I don't eat because I only have enough to feed them. I'll eat whatever is left over on their plates. I just tell them I'm not hungry."</p> <p>Even as coronavirus rates continue to drop and the American labor market nears full recovery from the pandemic, food banks are seeing another surge in need. Most pandemic-era assistance programs have ended, inflation is rising and many Americans are once again having trouble making ends meet.</p> <p>Food bank officials are reporting growing lines at their distribution centers nationwide. And rates of reported hunger have been increasing since early August, when 7.8 percent of those polled said they "sometimes" or "often" did not have enough to eat, according to data from the Census Household Pulse Survey data. In early February, 10.2 percent of those polled said their household sometimes doesn't have enough to eat. That uptick is more significant for households with children, rising to 13.1 percent, although off from pandemic peaks.</p> <p>In late January and early February, after child tax credit payments ended, 35 percent of adults living in households with children said they struggled to cover usual costs, according to census data.</p>

“Make no mistake, people are still struggling. They are struggling in Richmond and all across the country,” said Levar Stoney, mayor of Richmond “My fear, and the fear of many mayors, is that many of our residents are returning to chow lines. We want to keep the social safety net intact. It’s still necessary as people get back on their feet.”

Stoney was among those in the U.S. Conference of Mayors who [sent a letter](#) to Congress on Thursday urging them to support extending the expanded eligibility and increased benefit levels of federal nutrition programs.

Inflation is the new challenge, said Thomas Mantz, chief executive of Feeding Tampa Bay, one of a network of 200 food banks nationally.

“There’s been some mild recovery and that is good, but another concern brewing is that inflation is driving prices up in three key areas,” Mantz said. “For many Americans, 30 to 40 percent of their budget is rent, food and gas. But for the families we serve, it’s more like 60 percent. So, you have families for whom instability is revisiting them significantly now.”

Although the economy has recovered for many Americans and stimulus and child tax credits helped many families last year, there are still a lot of families who are digging out from the financial impact of extended furloughs or reduced household incomes, said Kyle Waide, president of the Atlanta Community Food Bank.

“While food distribution to neighbors in need has declined from the peak of the pandemic, the Atlanta Community Food Bank continues to see the need for food assistance considerably higher, as much as 30 percent, compared to pre-pandemic need,” Waide said.

Inflation data [released](#) in March indicates substantial price increases in gasoline, shelter and food. The gasoline index rose 6.6 percent in February and accounted for almost a third of the monthly increase. The food index saw the largest monthly increases since April 2020.

Foodsmart, a telehealth meal planning and food ordering app, reported an increase in users qualifying as food insecure over the past several months, with a majority of members saying, “healthy food is too expensive.”

“The economic impacts of covid-19 will remain for the next few years, well after the health risks from the virus have subsided,” said Radha Muthiah, chief executive of Capital Area Food Bank, which serves the Washington, D.C., area. “We know that need is still significantly higher, and we project that it will remain so. Anecdotally, many of our partners are still seeing higher volumes of individuals coming through their doors, some as many as two or three times their pre-pandemic levels.”

Plus, federal programs that had been aimed to help food banks have expired, meanwhile food costs have gone up, which has meant Capital Area’s budget for purchasing food is seven times what it was pre-pandemic, Muthiah said.

At the national level, food banks in the Feeding America network in February still moved twice as many truckloads of food as they did in February 2020, and transportation costs are up 20 percent, said Feeding America spokeswoman Zuani Villarreal. And what’s in those trucks is costing more. A truckload of canned tuna cost \$46,000 in February 2020 and is now \$57,000; a truckload of peanut butter was about \$34,000 and is now \$40,000; a truckload of diced tomatoes was \$15,000 and is now \$23,000.

Most food banks say food purchase costs are up, and they’re also paying more for transportation and distribution, while reporting labor shortages. Feeding America [has asked Congress for](#) more funding to buy food by bumping up money through the Emergency Food Assistance Program.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told The Washington Post that \$100 million [in new grants](#) has been made available to the Emergency Food Assistance Program state agencies, and that the USDA has the

	<p>purchasing power through a separate program to supplement the commodities that food banks need. Vilsack said he understands food banks are facing difficult situations.</p> <p>“We can always take a look at purchasing food. But what we’ve got here is a situation where we have lots of demand and unstable supply. We’re addressing the supply chain issue, but that’s going to take time,” Vilsack said, adding that the USDA “is very limited in terms of what we can do, absent appropriations by the Congress, or waiver authority, or what is left that hasn’t been allocated under pandemic assistance.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Russia spy boss detained; stalled invasion?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/reported-detention-of-russian-spy-boss-shows-tension-over-stalled-ukraine-invasion-u-s-officials-say-11647687601
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—Recriminations and finger-pointing have begun within Russia’s spy and defense agencies, as the campaign that Moscow expected to culminate in a lightning seizure of Ukraine’s capital has instead turned into a costly and embarrassing morass, U.S. officials said.</p> <p>The blame game, which includes the detention of at least one senior Russian intelligence official, doesn’t appear to pose any immediate threat to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s iron grip on power, but the U.S. officials are watching the machinations closely.</p> <p>A U.S. official described as credible reports that the commander of the FSB intelligence agency’s unit responsible for Ukraine had been placed under house arrest.</p> <p>The official, in an interview, also said bickering had broken out between the FSB and the Russian Ministry of Defense, two of the principal government units responsible for the preparation of the Feb. 24 invasion.</p> <p>Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns told Congress earlier this month that Mr. Putin had planned to seize Ukraine’s capital of Kyiv within two days, suggesting the Russian leader expected minimal resistance.</p> <p>Russian forces instead encountered fierce Ukrainian counterattacks and their ground advance stalled this week amid mounting casualties. Four Russian generals have died, the Ukrainian government says. Some U.S. government calculations estimate as many as 7,000 Russian troops have been killed in action, though officials caution those are uncertain estimates.</p> <p>Current and former U.S. officials say Russian intelligence agencies often shy away from telling their bosses bad news and may have reinforced Mr. Putin’s views, which he has expressed publicly, that Ukraine was a dysfunctional country whose leadership would rapidly collapse as some of its citizens welcomed Russian troops.</p> <p>“It is hard to imagine some senior intelligence person talking with Putin and not telling Putin what he wants to hear, especially if it is a belief that is deeply held, like Putin’s beliefs about Ukraine,” said Jeffrey Edmonds, a former CIA and National Security Council official specializing in the region.</p> <p>“When it comes to this guy, it’s also clear that the culture of ‘someone is at fault and is going to pay’ is clearly still operative,” said Mr. Edmonds, now at the nonprofit research organization CNA, of the Russian president.</p> <p>The Russian embassy didn’t immediately respond on Friday to a request for comment.</p> <p>The FSB officer said to be under investigation and house arrest is Col.-Gen. Sergei Beseda, head of the intelligence agency’s Fifth Service, also known as the Service for Operational Information and International Communications.</p>

Another former U.S. intelligence official who has studied Russia for decades said Mr. Putin, a former FSB chief, helped create the Fifth Service, which operates as the de facto foreign-intelligence arm of the overall agency, which is primarily focused on internal security. It would have shared responsibility for preparing the way for the invasion of Ukraine, the former official said. That, he said, likely included a plot made public by the U.S. and U.K., but denied by Russia, to eliminate Ukraine's leadership and install pro-Moscow successors.

Russian investigative journalist Andrei Soldatov, who co-wrote the first report on Mr. Beseda's house arrest, said Mr. Putin may be blaming the FSB for failing to bring about the rapid collapse of the Ukrainian government that he had expected.

"Putin himself has been absolutely sure that he understands Ukraine really well," said Mr. Soldatov, who is a senior fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis, a nonpartisan Washington think tank. "He expected his agencies, and first of all the FSB, to do some groundwork like cultivating political groups that could provide support for the Russian invasion. And now obviously that's not what is happening."

The Russian leader, Mr. Soldatov added, may also suspect the FSB of leaks, given U.S. intelligence agencies' detailed knowledge of the Russian invasion plan, some of which Washington made public. The Fifth Service's responsibilities include maintaining contact with foreign intelligence agencies, including on counterterrorism issues, he said.

The U.S. Treasury placed financial sanctions on Mr. Beseda, along with other Russian individuals and entities, in 2014 for their alleged role in Russia's seizure of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine.

Andrea Kendall-Taylor, who was U.S. deputy national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia from 2015-2018, said Russian security services have overlapping responsibilities and compete for favor from the Kremlin.

Mr. Putin appears to be singling out individuals to "scapegoat and pass the blame," said Ms. Kendall-Taylor, now at the Center for a New American Security. "I think he's in a much more precarious position now."

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HEADLINE	03/21 US sends Patriot missiles to Saudi Arabia
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sends-patriot-missiles-to-saudi-arabia-filling-an-urgent-request-11647822871?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON—The Biden administration has transferred a significant number of Patriot antimissile interceptors to Saudi Arabia within the past month, fulfilling Riyadh's urgent request for a resupply amid sharp tensions in the relationship, senior U.S. officials said.</p> <p>The transfers sought to ensure that Saudi Arabia is adequately supplied with the defensive munitions it needs to fend off drone and missile attacks by the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen, one of the officials said.</p> <p>The Saudi military had been appealing to the U.S., since late last year for more Patriot interceptors—missiles used to shoot down airborne weapons—warning that their supply was running dangerously low.</p> <p>U.S.-Saudi relations have deteriorated since Mr. Biden took office over issues such as a White House decision to remove the Houthis from a list of designated terrorist groups, as well as Mr. Biden's dealings with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the country's de facto leader.</p> <p>The longstanding Saudi request for more interceptors had been a point of contention between Washington and Riyadh, feeding Saudi officials' displeasure over what they contend was a lack of U.S. support for their intervention in the Yemen civil war.</p>

U.S. officials said the decision to send the interceptors had taken months because of the high demand for the weapons by other U.S. allies and the need to go through normal vetting—not because the White House was deliberately delaying the resupply.

The interceptors and other munitions sent to Saudi Arabia were taken from U.S. stockpiles elsewhere in the Middle East, one of the officials said.

The decision to go ahead with the arms transfer was part of an effort by the Biden administration to rebuild its relationship with Riyadh. Among other things, the U.S. hopes Saudi Arabia will pump more oil to mitigate soaring crude prices, officials said. But providing Patriot interceptors hasn't resolved all the strains in the relationship.

Mr. Biden also publicly criticized Saudi Arabia over its protracted war in Yemen and cut off the flow of some weapons Riyadh could use to target Houthis. The president also reversed a move by his predecessor that put the Houthis on the U.S.'s official list of global terrorist groups, a move that Saudi leaders said had emboldened the Yemeni force and thwarted efforts to broker a cease-fire.

The latest attacks on Saudi Arabia came late Saturday and early Sunday when Houthi forces in Yemen fired missiles and drones at energy and water-desalination facilities run by Aramco, the Saudi state oil company.

The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attacks, which a spokesman said were in response to “the continued aggression and unjust siege of our people.”

Jake Sullivan, Mr. Biden's national security adviser, condemned the Houthi attacks in a statement Sunday.

“The Houthis launch these terrorist attacks with enabling by Iran, which supplies them with missile and UAV components, training, and expertise,” he said, referring to unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones.

The missiles and drone attacks were fired at a water-desalination plant in Al-Shaqeeq; a distribution station in Jizan; a liquefied-natural-gas plant in Yanbu; a power station in Dhahran al Janub; and a gas facility in Khamis Mushait. Aramco said there were no casualties or impact on its supplies, while the Saudi-led military coalition backing the Yemeni government said the strikes damaged civilian vehicles and homes in the area.

In 2019, the Houthis claimed credit for coordinated strikes on oil facilities in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province. The U.S. later blamed the attacks on Iran. But missile barrages and drone strikes from Yemen have continued steadily since.

Patriot antimissile batteries are only one of the weapons used by the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates to counter the Houthi attacks. Many of the slow-flying drones are shot down by fighter aircraft.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Putin loses another top commander
SOURCE	https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10632485/Putin-loses-commander-Black-Sea-Fleet-captain-51-shot-dead-near-Mariupol.html
GIST	<p>Ukraine claimed today that its forces had shot dead the deputy commander of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in another significant blow to Vladimir Putin's forces.</p> <p>First rank captain Andrey Paliy, 51, is the only senior naval officer allegedly killed in the war in Ukraine, although Kyiv claims to have slain five army generals.</p> <p>Col Sergei Sukharev, of the 331st Guards Parachute Assault Regiment from Kostroma, was killed on March 18 and Andrei Sukhovetsky, 47, was killed during a special operation by a sniper on March 3.</p>

	<p>In addition, Major-General Oleg Mityaev, 47, commander of the army's 150th motorised rifle division, died fighting around the besieged city of Mariupol, Major General Vitaly Gerasimov, 45, was killed on March 7 outside the eastern city of Kharkiv, and Colonel Andrey Kolesnikov, Commander of the Guards Tank Kantemirovskaya Division, was killed in fighting on March 11.</p> <p>It came as Russia claimed to have hit a training facility for foreign fighters killing more than 100 special forces personnel and non-Ukrainian mercenaries.</p> <p>Paliy's death appeared to be confirmed by a Russian friend, Konstantin Tsarenko, secretary of the public council of the Sevastopol Nakhimov Naval School, although it has not been officially acknowledged by Moscow.</p> <p>One account said that he had been involved with Russian marines attacks near Mariupol.</p> <p>However, the exact circumstances of his reported death are not known.</p> <p>Paliy was born in Kyiv and in 1993 refused to take the Ukrainian military oath, instead serving in the Russian Northern Fleet.</p> <p>He had earlier served on the Russian nuclear missile cruiser 'Peter the Great'.</p> <p>He also served as deputy head of the Russian naval academy in Sevastopol, in annexed Crimea.</p> <p>Ukrainian official Anton Gerashchenko claimed Palsy's death early today without giving further details.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 AAA: average gas price dips to \$4.25
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/gas-prices-3-21-2022
GIST	<p>The price of gasoline continued moving lower over the weekend after setting a record high a week ago.</p> <p>The average price for a gallon of gasoline in the U.S. slipped on Sunday to \$4.252 according to the latest numbers from AAA. The price on Sunday was \$4.255.</p> <p>The previous record high was \$4.33, set on Friday March 11, 2022.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Companies unite against Russia
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-war-ukraine-business-sanctions-11647647580?mod=hp_listc_pos1
GIST	<p>About 10 minutes into Sunday church services, Visa Inc. Chief Executive Alfred Kelly looked down at his phone and saw a text message. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was trying to reach him.</p> <p>It was Feb. 27, and in the three days since Russia invaded Ukraine, the payments network chief had been consumed by the fallout. His primary concern was the 155 employees he had inside Ukraine. Visa hired armed security guards to drive some families in vans to Poland. The request from Mr. Zelensky added to the scope of the problem.</p> <p>“That was the initial sign to me about the pressure we would feel...to put pressure on the Russian government,” Mr. Kelly said at a conference on March 8, three days after Visa had announced it would suspend operations in Russia.</p> <p>Two years after the Covid-19 pandemic tore into the global economy, business leaders have had to confront another crisis that left them racing to protect staff, untangle supply-chain snarls and revamp operations around the world. It has also required each company to rethink its future in Russia, a country of 150 million people and vast natural resources, whose army is now waging a bloody war.</p>

This time, companies were more prepared. The pandemic had given leaders a crisis playbook. Years of corporate activism on issues such as climate change and racial discrimination had trained them to respond to a range of issues. The invasion took many by surprise, but they reacted quickly to what was a potentially fatal threat to their employees and also a reputational threat to their businesses.

When President [Vladimir Putin](#) launched the attack on Feb. 24, and pressure from governments and employees began to build, as well as escalating sanctions on Russia, companies moved with unusual speed and a sense of collective action. The result was a corporate participation in geopolitics with little recent precedent.

“I never believed that Putin would invade Ukraine. I never imagined there would be a war in Europe,” said [Volkswagen](#) AG CEO Herbert Diess. Within days of the invasion, Mr. Diess shut down or curtailed production at some of his biggest factories in Europe because the plants couldn’t get wiring harnesses from suppliers in Ukraine. The company later closed down production at its car plants in Russia, citing its “great dismay and shock” over the invasion.

Russia’s war has resulted in thousands of deaths, displaced millions of people and rattled the global economy. Soon after it began, U.S. and European governments worked together to create the [biggest coordinated package of sanctions](#) ever levied against a major economy, to cut off Russia’s banks, businesses and oligarchs from the global financial systems. Stock markets wobbled. Russia’s currency plunged. Oil prices surged.

More than 400 companies have since announced plans to suspend or scale back their operations. They include American icons like [McDonald’s](#) Corp. and [Coca-Cola](#) Co. with large operations inside Russia, and international banking and manufacturing firms that underpin global trade.

Many of the companies had stayed through previous turmoil in Russia, Western criticism of its government and sanctions on top officials. They had seen opportunity despite the challenges. This was different.

For some it wasn’t much of a financial sacrifice, with Russia accounting for just a small slice of their revenues. CEOs didn’t want to risk having their brands tarnished as Russian attacks began hitting civilian areas. Once sanctions took hold, many leaders didn’t see how they could continue with business as usual.

Some CEOs said the moves were temporary or caused by supply-chain problems. Others said they would continue in Russia for humanitarian reasons. A few said they were leaving for good.

In Russia, Mr. Putin has endorsed a plan to seize assets of companies that fled. In an address to the U.S. Congress, Mr. Zelensky took aim at international companies that stayed. Thousands of jobs, billions of dollars of investment and the direction of global trade are on the line.

Escape from Ukraine

József Váradi was at a management retreat in the Austrian countryside when the airline boss learned the invasion had started. A European Commission official called him at 3 a.m. and said, “Ukrainian airspace is shut.”

The CEO of discount carrier [Wizz Air Holdings](#) PLC, based in Budapest, Hungary, told his top deputy that their evacuation plan for the company’s staff and aircraft in Ukraine wasn’t viable. It needed a three-hour window.

Instead, Wizz activated its crisis protocol, typically reserved for scenarios like a hijacking or crash. The first task was to locate the roughly 200 staff in Ukraine, their family members and the families of another 100 Ukrainians the company employs in other locations.

Passengers booked on Wizz flights in Ukraine were cautioned not to go to the airport. A rare return-to-base order was issued, instructing all managers to cut short conferences and vacations.

The week before the invasion, Mr. Váradi had visited his company's two bases in Ukraine, in Kyiv and Lviv. The staff had seemed confident, he said, and determined to stay in place. "No one really believed that there could be any serious development," the CEO said.

On Feb. 27, three days after the invasion, Wizz suspended its flying to Russia after the EU banned Russian airlines from operating in its airspace. Russia would follow with a reciprocal ban.

Wizz was the only EU airline to have aircraft based in Ukraine when the war broke out. Its four aircraft are still in the country, monitored by security and satellite footage and inspected by engineers on the ground.

Just over half of Wizz's employees in Ukraine have left since the start of the invasion. As the war intensified, the company hired extraction forces to escort some of them and their families in bulletproof vests to the border. The rest have either chosen to stay to be with family or can't leave because of conscription.

Card giant Visa was also focused on extracting its staff from Ukraine during the first week of the war. Mr. Kelly, the CEO, was disturbed by what he saw happening. "Probably one of the most brutal meetings I've had in my career was talking to our Ukrainian employees" in which they shared pictures of their destroyed homes, he said.

It was one of a few factors that convinced Mr. Kelly that he needed to suspend Visa's business in Russia, he said at an investor conference on March 8. Constantly escalating Western sanctions were making it increasingly difficult to operate there. And he wanted to get ahead of what he thought would be another round of sanctions that could spark a disorderly exit from Russia.

"We decided we would be far better off taking a thoughtful wind-down approach" to end work with clients there and help employees leave the country, he said.

On March 5, Mr. Zelensky called out Visa and [Mastercard](#) Inc. in a meeting with U.S. lawmakers, asking them to stop handling transactions in Russia. That evening, Visa said it would suspend its operations in Russia. Within minutes, Mastercard did, too.

A moral dilemma

The Kyiv offices of [Yara International](#), one of the world's largest fertilizer companies, were hit by a missile on the first Saturday of the war.

Yara CEO Svein Tore Holsether looked at images of the damage. "To see our logo on a building with a big hole in it, it all felt very close," he said.

Yara had been preparing for weeks and none of the 11 staff was hurt in the attack. But the Norway-based company faced the increasing threat that sanctions would choke off Russian raw materials it used.

As other companies began extracting themselves from Russia, Mr. Holsether faced what he saw as a moral dilemma. The pandemic had already put food supply under strain. He worried that if he cut out Russian products and produced less fertilizer, crops would suffer and shortages in world-wide access to food would only increase.

Fertilizer prices had already been high before the war. Now they were skyrocketing. Mr. Holsether wondered if he would increase the price by withdrawing from Russia. "I don't think it is up to me to go forward with the decision," he told himself.

On March 9, the decision was made for him when the EU sanctioned the owners of Russia's largest fertilizer companies. Two days later, Yara said it would no longer source supplies from Russia.

The price of urea, a key component of many fertilizers, has soared by roughly \$450 since the invasion, settling Thursday at \$1,115 per metric ton for one key benchmark, according to BMO Capital Markets.

“We are going to have a food crisis. It’s a question of how large,” said Mr. Holsether.

At the German chemical and drug giant Bayer AG, some employees were making emotional pleas to executives, begging them to halt all shipments of the company’s seeds, medications, pesticides and other products to Russia. A few staffers emailed concerns to CEO Werner Baumann directly.

A crisis team of executives, led by Mr. Baumann, were meeting every other afternoon to discuss the company’s response, as well as supply-chain and workforce issues.

Bayer decided it would stop nonessential business in Russia and Belarus, but said that withdrawing seeds and pesticides would exacerbate food shortages arising from the conflict. “There are people behind each of these statements,” Mr. Baumann said.

Cutting off cancer medications and cardiovascular treatments to Russia would also worsen the humanitarian toll, the company decided. “Shall we now say: Pull the carpet underneath these people’s feet?” Mr. Baumann said. “I quite frankly think, ethically, it’s totally irresponsible.”

The crisis team also discussed how to pay the company’s 700 employees in Ukraine. With some of the staffers unable to access the banking system, Bayer explored alternate ways to get them cash. In early March, Mr. Baumann asked internal teams to consider how Bayer would respond—and continue to operate—in different scenarios such as if the war spread into Europe or there was a sudden cease-fire.

Milk and soda

Pepsi in 1974 was among the first American brands to enter the Soviet Union, after a Cold War encounter in Moscow in 1959 when then-Vice President Richard Nixon offered a cup of the cola to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

By 2022, PepsiCo Inc. had 20,000 employees in Russia and it was the company’s third-largest market after the U.S. and Mexico. The company’s 24 plants and three R&D centers in Russia made soft drinks, potato chips, milk, yogurt, cheese, baby food and baby formula.

The bulk of the business was a Russian dairy-and-juice company PepsiCo had bought in 2011 for about \$5 billion. The Russian business operated in rubles, and used locally sourced milk and potatoes, though it imported soft-drink concentrates from Ireland.

The company’s top officials discussed the geopolitical crisis nearly every day. They were reluctant to shut down the Russian operations, according to people familiar with the matter. The leaders wanted to do right by their employees and consumers, and they were under pressure to join other Western companies making moves to penalize Russia. They also had a responsibility to shareholders.

On the afternoon of March 8, McDonald’s said it was closing its restaurants in Russia. Then Coca-Cola said it was suspending its business there. Within half an hour, PepsiCo CEO Ramon Laguarta sent a memo to staff. The company would stop selling Pepsi and 7UP in Russia, he told them, but it wasn’t pulling out.

“We must stay true to the humanitarian aspect of our business” by providing daily essentials such as milk inside Russia, he wrote. “By continuing to operate, we will also continue to support the livelihoods” of PepsiCo’s Russian employees and thousands of agricultural workers who supply the Russian business with potatoes and milk.

Behind the scenes, the company’s leaders explored another action it could still take. PepsiCo could write down the value of its Russian business to zero, modeling the process it used for its Venezuelan operations in 2015. The Venezuelan unit is still operating—and PepsiCo still owns it—but it doesn’t contribute to the company’s earnings.

Oil stakes

BP PLC, one of the Western companies most exposed to Russia, had investments in the country dating back three decades. The British oil giant held a nearly 20% stake in Russian state-controlled oil producer Rosneft.

When Russian troops began amassing on Ukraine's border, executives at BP believed they could weather the fallout. In the weeks before the invasion, CEO Bernard Looney told analysts that he'd learned to "not worry about things until they happen."

The day after the invasion started, Mr. Looney spoke with Kwasi Kwarteng, the U.K.'s secretary of state for business and energy. The politician made clear the British government was unhappy with BP's Rosneft stake and expected BP to respond, according to people familiar with the matter.

BP announced its pullout following an emergency board meeting two days later, becoming one of the first to signal its intention to exit. It warned the move could result in potential losses, including write-downs and charges, totaling up to \$25 billion.

Before making its decision public, Mr. Looney broke the news to Rosneft's CEO, Igor Sechin, a former KGB operative. BP officials found Mr. Sechin surprisingly understanding, the people said. Mr. Sechin was later among the Putin loyalists whose assets were targeted by Western governments.

BP's move set the stage for Shell PLC to then announce it was ending its Russian joint ventures, and to get out of the just-halted Nord Stream 2 pipeline project poised to carry gas into Germany. Within days, Exxon Mobil Corp. said it would shut down production from a giant oil-and-gas project it runs on Russia's Sakhalin Island.

Dumping alcohol

Anheuser-Busch InBev SA reported its quarterly results the day the war started. CEO Michel Doukeris had flown from New York to Belgium to host the earnings presentation. He gave interviews to CNBC, The Wall Street Journal and other outlets about the financial results, knowing that they were no longer relevant news. All anyone was talking about was Ukraine.

For two months, the Budweiser brewer had a team in Europe working on contingency plans for a conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The company had breweries and employees in both countries, which were also key producers of wheat and barley.

By 9 a.m., an AB InBev crisis team was tracking the locations of the company's 1,800 employees in Ukraine along with their families. The crisis team booked hotel rooms near the Polish border and advised employees on the best routes to get there or to other border crossings.

AB InBev had 11 breweries in Russia, and was coming under pressure to take a moral stance. First, the company had to talk with Turkish brewer Anadolu Efes, the controlling partner of the companies' joint venture in Ukraine and Russia.

Efes wanted to continue its Russian operations to support its 3,500 employees and the farmers who supplied the breweries. AB InBev decided to ringfence the Russian joint venture and forfeit any profit or other financial benefit from it.

AB InBev also asked Efes to suspend the license for the production and sale of its Bud brand in Russia. "Budweiser is a global brand that stands for values," Mr. Doukeris said. The company will continue brewing other beers in Russia.

Soon after the invasion, some consumers and bartenders started dumping Stolichnaya vodka and other products they associated with Russia.

The vodka, however, is produced in Latvia. Damian McKinney, the CEO of Stoli Group, said that the company had previously considered distancing itself from its Russian heritage. Stoli Group and the Russian government have fought for years over the Stolichnaya trademark, which was owned by a state entity during the Soviet Union and changed hands after it was privatized in the 1990s.

Stoli Group's Russian founder and chairman, Yuri Shefler, says he has lived outside of Russia since 2002 because of his opposition to Mr. Putin.

Mr. McKinney had been watching Russia massing troops on Ukraine's border for weeks before the war. The former Royal Marine had begun gaming out how he might protect the vodka maker from supply-chain issues, including labels and bottle caps made in Ukraine.

On the morning of the invasion, Mr. McKinney phoned Mr. Shefler to discuss the company's stance. They agreed that Mr. McKinney would tell the 240 employees who would dial into the monthly town hall later that day that Stoli Group condemned the attack. "We needed people to understand we were on the good guys' side," Mr. McKinney said.

Mr. McKinney also decided the time was ripe for Stolichnaya to rebrand. On March 4, the company announced its vodka would change its name to Stoli and it would stop sourcing ethanol used to make the spirit from Russia.

Supply woes

The disruption to already-strained global supply lines hit car makers like Volkswagen hard.

Average hourly wages of 4 euros, or \$4.41, made Ukraine an attractive location for manufacturers of auto components that required many hours of manual labor. Thus wiring harnesses—which organize the cables inside a car—took on outsize importance when Ukrainian factories shut and supplies to VW's auto plants dried up.

"I knew what would happen if Ukraine production stopped," said Mr. Diess, the Volkswagen boss. "But we never thought Ukraine would get hit. We thought Northern Africa would be the problem."

On the night of the invasion, Mr. Diess called an emergency board meeting for the next day. The VW board agreed to duplicate the tools used in the affected plants in Ukraine to help suppliers produce wiring harnesses at sites outside the country. That would take weeks, and parts began to run out in days.

Soon after, VW shut production at its main plant in Wolfsburg, Germany. Audi temporarily shut down some production. And Porsche had to halt production of its Taycan luxury electric sedan. VW later shut production at its car plants in Russia.

Some production is coming back online, but it remains patchy. It's yet another challenge for an industry still wrestling with a semiconductor shortage. "It is going to take suppliers months to sort this out," Mr. Diess said.

Boeing Co. had employees in Kyiv and Moscow, as well as a longtime relationship with a key Russian titanium supplier led by Sergey Chemezov, an oligarch with close ties to Mr. Putin. The partnership, forged a quarter-century ago, includes a joint venture in the Ural Mountains that fashions aircraft parts hard to replicate elsewhere.

Chief Executive David Calhoun made clear the aerospace giant would need to suspend its operations in Russia, including its purchases of titanium from the supplier and their joint venture. Boeing had drawn up plans to get titanium elsewhere after Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula in 2014 and the U.S. first imposed sanctions on Mr. Chemezov, a former KGB official.

“We are a U.S. company and we are going to follow the U.S. government,” Mr. Calhoun told his leadership team in a videoconference on Feb. 28. “We need to be closely aligned with our government, regardless of the implications.”

Soon after, Boeing said it would close its office in Moscow. The company also said it would stop sending plane parts to Russian airlines and halt purchases of Russian titanium. The U.S. announced additional sanctions targeting Mr. Chemezov.

Online operations

Twilio Inc. CEO Jeff Lawson and other tech CEOs relayed updates and advice on a shared Slack group as the war escalated. They asked each other whether they should pull out of the country or cease doing business with some entities.

They talked about whether it would help Russians on the ground if the companies they ran, especially those that are internet-based applications, continued providing services to help spread factual information about what was going on in the region.

On March 4, Russia’s communications watchdog said it was blocking access to Facebook in response to restrictions it said the social-media giant placed on Russian media outlets.

“Do we want to further isolate Russian people from the truth or do we want to do the best we can to ensure a flow of information into Russia?” said Mr. Lawson, who co-founded Twilio, a cloud-communications company.

On March 7, Twilio said it would keep its service in Russia but suspend new business in the country, terminate state-owned customers and block misinformation. The financial cost was negligible, accounting for tens of millions of dollars out of Twilio’s roughly \$3 billion in revenue last year, Mr. Lawson said.

Ultimately, Mr. Lawson decided it was important for Twilio to operate in Russia, particularly with nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations that are trying to help Russian citizens get accurate information. The Norwegian Refugee Council was using Twilio’s WhatsApp interface to communicate with people affected by the crisis as volunteers on the ground arranged housing, food and basic needs, he said.

Micha Kaufman’s company, Fiverr International Ltd., runs a marketplace for freelance workers. He didn’t want to penalize its Russian workers for a situation out of their control, but the Russian financial system was shutting down. “Essentially Russians have no way to pay or get paid,” Mr. Kaufman said. “Even if we want to work in Russia, it’s impossible.”

On March 9, Fiverr said it would suspend operations in Russia while allowing Russians to withdraw their existing earnings from the platform. The business is small, but the devastation from the war and financial sanctions on Russia drove the decision. “There’s a lot of pressure from all sides to close or keep open or join other companies,” Mr. Kaufman said. “It’s important that we do things the way we usually do things, and not because other companies or people are calling to do certain stuff.”

Cyberattack

For Lynn Good, CEO of Duke Energy Corp., Russia’s aggression raised a worry closer to home: the risk of cyberattacks on the U.S. electric grid.

Her company, which provides electricity and natural gas to customers in several U.S. states, has been on alert months before the Russian invasion, she said.

“We have been in a state of preparedness that is very heightened, monitoring everything, sharing information in a way that is really important for a moment like this,” she said, adding that Duke has been in regular contact with the U.S. government and FBI.

Cybersecurity firm Rapid7 Inc., which has more than 10,000 customers, had been preparing for such threats since mid-February.

For CEO Corey Thomas, the invasion started in the middle of a vacation week. He was at Walt Disney World with his family standing near the Seven Dwarfs Mine Train when the news alerts started popping up about Russia.

“How are we going to deal with this from a personnel perspective?” Mr. Thomas thought. That day, he had his AirPods in and iPhone out, using voice text and calls to connect with staff and customers while also plotting out the family’s next ride.

Mr. Thomas said the company has seen cybercriminals trying to use the uncertain environment of the war to their advantage, such as phishing attacks tailored to helping Ukraine or humanitarian aid, but it has been largely business as usual. His firm is working with multinational companies that have operations in Russia but stopped new business from customers whose primary location is in Russia or Belarus.

“We do expect escalations and we’re really watching the spillover,” he said. “One of the big things: Russians are really good at malware. Malware is really hard to contain.”

Refugee aid

By the third week of fighting, there were more than 3 million refugees from Ukraine, according to the United Nations.

Airbnb Inc. CEO Brian Chesky suggested in a team meeting just before the invasion that the company be prepared to offer free housing to 20,000 refugees. The number matched a previous commitment by the home-sharing service for Afghan refugees.

Two days into the war, Mr. Chesky realized it wasn’t going to be enough. He began calling people he thought could help cover the costs of additional housing. Among them: actor Ashton Kutcher, an early Airbnb investor, and his Ukrainian-born wife, Mila Kunis.

The couple started a GoFundMe campaign for Airbnb.org, the company’s nonprofit arm. Donations poured in.

At 6 p.m. that Saturday, Mr. Chesky called an executive meeting to announce that Airbnb would provide free stays to 100,000 Ukrainian refugees. “If we were around during World War II, how would we want to be remembered?” he told them. “I want us to be one of those companies that stepped up.”

On March 3, Airbnb suspended bookings in Russia and Belarus. The region was a sliver of Airbnb’s business and sanctions were making it difficult to continue paying hosts.

The same day, Mr. Chesky noticed something unusual. Hosts in parts of war-ravaged Ukraine were getting a surge in bookings from guests who didn’t intend to show up. People were booking Airbnb stays as a way to send money to Ukrainians.

The CEO was stumped. The service wasn’t designed for such donations—hosts are paid after guests check out and the platform can flag same-day stays as fraudulent if guests aren’t in the same geography as hosts.

Mr. Chesky created a team to accelerate payments to hosts and removed blockers that would otherwise flag such stays. He waived Airbnb’s service fee on all Ukraine bookings. As of March 11, Ukrainian hosts had received more than \$15 million in such donations.

“In a world of darkness and destruction,” he said, “it was a reminder that kindness still exists.”

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SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220318-no-letup-in-russian-influence-operations
GIST	<p>According to U.S. and Ukrainian officials, Moscow's efforts to win over the world with its accounts of events in Ukraine are doing no better than Russia's military forces inside Ukraine.</p> <p>More often than not, they are meeting with stiff resistance.</p> <p>"Outside of Russia, we have not seen their information operations really find purchase," a senior U.S. defense official told reporters Thursday in response to a question from VOA.</p> <p>"We have seen a continuation of Russian attempts to blame stuff they're doing on the Ukrainians, to accuse Ukrainians of doing stuff that they (the Russians) haven't done yet," the official said, on condition of anonymity in order to discuss intelligence. "But outside of Russia, there's little to no evidence that their information ops are working. In fact, we've seen quite the opposite."</p> <p>Despite such assessments, Russian officials and Russian-affiliated media continued to try to seed social media and the airwaves in places their broadcasts have not been blocked, with allegations of wrongdoing by Ukraine and its backers.</p> <p>One of Russia's perhaps most successful recent tropes has been its allegation that the United States has been funding bioweapon research in Ukraine.</p> <p>A survey by the Washington-based Alliance for Securing Democracy, a national security advocacy group that tracks disinformation efforts online, found that Russian officials and Russian state-backed media tweeted the word "biological" almost 600 times in the past week.</p> <p>Russia's Ministry of Defense sought to push those claims further Thursday, publishing new allegations on its English-language Telegram feed.</p> <p>"Russian specialists of nuclear, biological and chemical protection troops have studied original documents revealing details of the implementation of a secret project by the United States in Ukraine to study ways of transmitting diseases to humans through bats at a laboratory in Kharkov," one post said.</p> <p>The Russian Telegram feed also began pushing claims that a theater in Mariupol where civilians had been sheltering was not hit by a Russian airstrike as claimed by the Mariupol city council, but blown up by the Azov Battalion, a pro-Ukrainian force that analysts say has embraced neo-Nazi views.</p> <p>"A refugee from Mariupol said that militants from the Azov nationalist battalion, while retreating, blew up the city drama theater where there were civilians, whom they used as a 'human shield,'" the Ministry of Defense said on Telegram.</p> <p>Within hours, the allegations about the bioweapons and the theater were being echoed on official Russian government and media Twitter accounts and websites, in multiple languages.</p> <p>The senior U.S. defense official declined Thursday to elaborate on the Russian accounts of how the theater in Mariupol was destroyed, saying only that none of the accounts could be confirmed at this time.</p> <p>But U.S. officials have repeatedly denied Russia's ongoing accusations about developing bioweapons in Ukraine.</p> <p>"It's a bunch of malarkey," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby told reporters last week. "We are not, not developing biological or chemical weapons inside Ukraine."</p> <p>U.S. intelligence officials also denied the charges, instead saying Moscow's insistence on repeating the allegations might indicate it is planning a chemical or biological attack.</p>

“This is something ... that’s very much a part of Russia’s playbook,” CIA Director William Burns told a Senate panel last week. “They’ve used those weapons against their own citizens. They’ve at least encouraged the use in Syria and elsewhere, so it’s something that we take very seriously.”

Still, there are some concerns that even if Russia is failing to sway most people in the West, a small minority are repeating the Kremlin’s talking points on podcasts and even on some U.S. cable news networks.

U.S. Republican Senator Marco Rubio last week noted that the bioweapons allegations in particular have “got some people fired up.”

Others are more optimistic.

“The sharing of intelligence to shine a light on disinformation ... I’ve never seen it better in the 35 years I’ve spent in uniform,” the head of the U.S. National Security Agency, General Paul Nakasone, told lawmakers late Thursday.

Ukrainian officials have likewise said their efforts are paying off.

“Ukraine is winning this information war and winning it massively” Heorhii Tykhy, an adviser to the spokesperson for Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said during a virtual forum last week.

“Defensive strategies are not enough. ... What really helps fight the disinformation is proactive strategies,” he added.

The senior U.S. defense official on Thursday was complimentary of Kyiv’s efforts, saying the impact is being felt far beyond Ukraine.

“Ukrainians are doing a good job staying ahead of the information ops,” the official said. “They’re doing a good job communicating ... using social media to great effect.”

“So, we just haven’t seen the Russians have much success.”

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HEADLINE	03/21 China Eastern Boeing 737-800 crashes
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/state-media-report-crash-of-chinese-airliner-with-133-aboard/
GIST	<p>BEIJING (AP) — A China Eastern Boeing 737 with 132 people on board crashed in the southern province of Guangxi on Monday, officials said.</p> <p>The Civil Aviation Administration of China said in a statement the crash occurred near the city of Wuzhou in Teng county. The flight was traveling from Kunming in the western province of Yunnan to the industrial center of Guangzhou along the east coast, it added.</p> <p>There was no immediate word on numbers of dead and injured. The plane was carrying 123 passengers and nine crew members, the CAAC said, correcting earlier reports that 133 people had been on board.</p> <p>The CAAC said it had sent a team of officials, and the Guangxi fire service said work was underway to control a mountainside blaze ignited by the crash.</p> <p>Satellite data from NASA showed a massive fire just in the area of where the plane went down at the time of the crash.</p> <p>Calls to China Eastern offices were not immediately answered. State media said local police first received calls from villagers alerting the crash around 2:30 p.m. (0630 GMT). Guangxi provincial emergency management department said contact with the plane was lost at 2:15 p.m. (0615 GMT).</p>

Chicago-based Boeing Co. also did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Shanghai-based China Eastern is one of China's top three airlines, operating scores of domestic and international routes serving 248 destinations.

China Eastern's flight No. 5735 had been traveling at around 30,000 feet when suddenly, just after 0620 GMT, the plane entered a deep dive at its cruising altitude speed of 455 knots (523 mph, 842 kph), according to data from flight-tracking website FlightRadar24.com. The data suggests the plane crashed within a minute and a half of whatever went wrong.

The plane stopped transmitting data just southwest of the Chinese city of Wuzhou.

The aircraft was delivered to China Eastern from Boeing in June 2015 and had been flying for more than six years.

The twin-engine, single aisle Boeing 737 is one of the world's most popular planes for short and medium-haul flights.

China Eastern operates multiple versions of the common aircraft, including the 737-800 and the 737 Max.

The deadliest crash involving a Boeing 737-800 came in January 2020, when Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard accidentally shot down a Ukraine International Airlines flight, killing all 176 people on board.

The 737 Max version was grounded worldwide after two fatal crashes. China's aviation regulator cleared that plane to return to service late last year, making the country the last major market to do so.

China's last deadly crash of a civilian jetliner was in 2010.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Truck convoy motivated against police
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/03/20/dc-police-peoples-convoy-roadblocks/
GIST	<p>The “People’s Convoy” of truck drivers and supporters that has been honking its way around D.C.-area roads and highways, backing up traffic in protest of the federal response to the coronavirus pandemic, has taken aim at government leaders, pharmaceutical and technology companies and the mainstream media. Now, as the convoy encounters roadblocks on its routes, it has a new perceived enemy: D.C. police leadership.</p> <p>This progression reflects the right-wing movement’s penchant to search for obstacles to overcome in its fight for vague yet lofty goals like “freedom,” extremism researchers say, as part of a playbook that uses sinister strategies like cloaking calls for violence in humor and instigating fights in a manner that later allows for claims of self-defense.</p> <p>“You’ve got to have villains. You’ve got to have enemies, you’ve got to have outgroups, and D.C. police, part because of what happened with Jan. 6, they have a special status as a potential source of antagonism for these folks,” said Pete Simi, a longtime researcher of far-right movements who testified as an expert witness at the federal civil trial last fall against the organizers of the deadly 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville.</p> <p>“Because of the emphasis on confrontation, there’s always that unforeseeable potential in terms of the turns that it can take, and when it is going to escalate to the point of where there’s potentially overt violence,” he added.</p>

When the convoy left Adelanto, Calif., on Feb. 23, inspired by the protest of the Canadian convoy in Ottawa, its organizers said they would not be going into the District. They arrived in this region on March 4, setting up a base camp at the Hagerstown Speedway in Western Maryland.

The group says it is protesting pandemic restrictions, even as many mandates have been blocked or lifted, but those at the speedway appear to be motivated by a broad range of right-wing grievances and conspiracy theories.

At first, they protested by circling the Capital Beltway. Then last week, they switched tactics and set their aims on the District, seemingly provoked by D.C. police blocking interstate exits into downtown Washington, a move those in the convoy call a violation of their First Amendment rights. In the District, convoy members have honked through the streets, while residents have reported harassment and disrupted commutes.

Last week, convoy organizer Brian Brase told the crowd that every time D.C. police “pulls their bulls--t ... they’re literally helping us. They think that they’re going to deter us. They think that they’re going to break us down and they think that we’re going to go away. But all they do is make us dig our heels in deeper.”

Pivoting to address D.C. police directly, Brase continued, “We still here, and we ain’t going anywhere. We will see you today, we will see you tomorrow, we will see you the day after that and the day after that and the day after that.”

It remains unclear how long the convoy and the road closures will continue. Convoy leaders have not announced any clear timeline or end date, and city leaders say they are prepared for this to be ongoing. Convoy members portray any ability to slip past the police barricades and enter downtown as a “win,” and Brase threatened last week to share the names of D.C. police he talked to and when they spoke.

This menace comes as the D.C. police union has [voiced concerns](#) about the safety of officers staffing stationary posts on the highway at all hours as vehicles move at fast speeds and requested an end to this measure.

D.C. police have declined to discuss security measures citing “operational tactics.” Chris Rodriguez, director of the Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, said that the city had been preparing for this demonstration for over a month and that officials are aware of “reports of threatening language and rhetoric coming from individuals associated with this demonstration activity.”

“There’s a difference between First Amendment activities which every American has the right to do,” Rodriguez said. “But it’s another thing to bring bobtails and tractor trailers into the District and threaten to commit violence.”

When rallying the crowds in Hagerstown, another convoy organizer, Mike Landis, has called supposed threats to lawmakers “enticing,” invoked violent phrases like “throat punch” when talking about demonstrating in the city and lamented, “This isn’t 1776. We can’t go load our muskets and go in guns blazing and take over.” He added, “I’m sure quite a few of us would love that opportunity.”

On Friday morning, Landis passed the microphone to a man onstage who launched into a racist rant against Black Lives Matter Plaza, urging the crowd to go into the District and vandalize it. “Everybody needs to get to D.C. now,” the man, who did not identify himself, said Friday.

“Black Lives Matter Street, we’re gonna take it back. All that paint’s coming off that street. Before I get put in my grave, it’s going to get tar and feathered, and then we’re going to tar and feather all our delegates,” the man said. That afternoon, members of the convoy drove their bobtail trucks through Black Lives Matter Plaza.

Extremism researchers have warned that this movement against pandemic restrictions and mandates attracts people motivated by such violent intentions and conspiratorial beliefs.

“That’s part of what the culture thrives on, the idea that they have this power to potentially intimidate, coerce through fear, through their history of using violent action that obviously, people are well aware of,” Simi said. “That is a source of empowerment for folks within that culture.”

Convoy protesters also gathered Saturday outside the D.C. home of Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, according to a live stream of the demonstration where a man wearing a “People’s Convoy” shirt cast doubt on the proven safety of the coronavirus vaccine.

Conversations about the convoy were already marked by paranoia, questioning if there are “infiltrators” among them, saying D.C. is some sort of a “trap,” labeling commuters as “antifa,” referring to anti-fascist activists, and encouraging drivers to report “any illegal activity” while on the road.

Convoy leaders claim police officers on the streets support them, urging supporters to direct their anger to police superiors. A D.C. police spokesperson refuted that claim: “Saying that every member of the badge is behind them is dangerous rhetoric and a sweeping generality that just frankly isn’t true.”

In taking aim at the city’s police department leadership, they are portraying their efforts to protest as another battle between the working class and the elite, said Sara Aniano, a Monmouth University graduate student who studies the social media rhetoric of far-right conspiracy theories and who has been closely following the convoy. “They’re really good at crafting a narrative based on the reactions of people around them without any real context,” she said.

Agencies in and around Washington are accustomed to responding to protests and demonstrations for a variety of causes. The convoy first entered D.C. last week, after an application by Brase for a nearly two-week permitted protest on the National Mall was partially denied because of other events already booked during that time frame, and then withdrawn, according to National Park Service records.

As the protest continues, it could dissolve, or some of the most ardent followers may remain, looking to take drastic and violent actions to achieve their goals, said Megan Squire, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center. She compared the grievances of the convoy protest to the motivations of supporters of former president Donald Trump who falsely believed the 2020 presidential election was stolen.

Some convoy members have bragged about being among the insurrectionist mob that attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6, including a woman with an upcoming trial who spoke onstage earlier this month.

“Some of these same folks after the election, they were increasingly frustrated, trying to take their anger out on somebody, looking for a cause, even a lie,” said Squire, also a professor at Elon University who studies right-wing extremism. “It’s a lot of the same animating ideas and mistrust of government,” she said. “These are people who have a very confused and damaging, a lot of times, worldview.”

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HEADLINE	03/20 US: Russia war crimes in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/20/austin-accuses-russia-committing-war-crimes-ukrain/
GIST	<p>Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin accused Russia of committing war crimes by deliberately targeting civilians since the invasion of Ukraine began a month ago.</p> <p>Russian President Vladimir Putin’s plan is to control the major population centers in Ukraine but it has had little success so far and thus the Kremlin is resorting to brutality, he said.</p>

Tactics such as the wholesale bombardment of the besieged Ukrainian city of [Mariupol](#), which has resulted in nearly 10% of the population fleeing over the past week, is “really disgusting,” Mr. Austin said Sunday on CBS News’ “Face the Nation.”

“He’s taking these kinds of steps because ... his campaign has stalled,” Mr. Austin said. “He’s not been able to achieve the goals that he wants to achieve as rapidly as he wants to achieve them.”

Russian troops have encircled [Mariupol](#), a port city on the Sea of Azov, for weeks. On Sunday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the siege would go down in history because of Russian troops committing war crimes.

Mariupol’s city council released a message on the Telegram social media platform saying the Russians dropped bombs Saturday on a local art school where about 400 residents — mostly women, children and older adults — were taking cover from the relentless fighting outside.

“The building was destroyed and peaceful people are still under the rubble. Information on the number of victims is being clarified,” the city council members said Sunday.

“Fascist Russian troops continue the genocide of the Ukrainian people and civilians in Mariupol. Every war criminal will be held accountable for his crimes against humanity [and] against the people of Mariupol,” the council said.

Russian forces are continuing to encircle a number of cities across eastern Ukraine but they have made only limited progress in capturing those cities, British military intelligence officials said Sunday in a Twitter message.

“Instead, Russia has increased its indiscriminate shelling of urban areas resulting in widespread destruction and large numbers of civilian casualties,” according to an intelligence update released by British defense officials.

“It is likely Russia will continue to use its heavy firepower to support assaults on urban areas as it looks to limit its own already considerable losses, at the cost of further civilian casualties,” the British agency wrote.

Russia claimed over the weekend that it carried out a set of strikes on Ukrainian military facilities using for the first time its Kinzhal long-range hypersonic missile.

Such weapons reportedly can strike targets more than 1,200 miles away while traveling at more than 10 times the speed of sound. But Mr. Austin said he wouldn’t consider such a weapon as a “game-changer” in the growing conflict between Russia and Ukraine because the use of the weapons raises fresh questions about Russia’s military performance.

“Why would he do this? Is he running low on precision-guided munitions? Does he have complete confidence in the ability of his troops to reestablish momentum,” Mr. Austin said Sunday.

Sen. John Barrasso, Wyoming Republican, said it has been necessary to push President Biden to get him to the position he holds today on Ukraine’s security.

“It was Congress that brought about sanctions, that brought about the ban on Russian oil, that brought about weapons and all of this big aid package,” Mr. Barrasso said Sunday on the ABC News program “This Week.”

“We might not have been in this situation if they had done punishing sanctions before the tanks began to roll,” he said.

On the same program, Senate Majority Whip Richard J. Durbin, Illinois Democrat, said he agreed with the Biden administration's position that shipping MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine could be considered an escalation of tensions with Russia.

"There are other ways for us to provide surface-to-air missiles and air defenses that will keep the Russians at bay in terms of their aerial attack," Mr. Durbin said. "There are ways to do that that are consistent with the NATO alliance and would not jeopardize expanding this into World War II."

Several of his Democratic colleagues have come out in support of the transfer.

Russia's plan was to quickly seize key Ukrainian cities, such as Kyiv and Odessa, to force a change of government.

That initial campaign is now over and Ukraine has come out on top, according to a Russian offensive campaign assessment published this week by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

The Russian forces are continuing to make limited advances but have been unable to seize their objectives.

A sound response would have been for the Russian commanders to suspend current operations, build up resources for a new campaign and launch when the conditions are better, according to the authors of the study.

Russia "is instead continuing to feed small collections of reinforcements into an ongoing effort to keep the current campaign alive. We assess that the effort will fail," according to the ISW study.

The protracted siege of Mariupol is seriously weakening Russian forces, according to the study. But its ultimate fate is unlikely to free up enough Russian combat power to change the outcome of the initial campaign.

"The block-by-block fighting ... is costing the Russian military time, initiative and combat-power," according to the IWS study.

Russian troops now appear to be digging in at their positions around Kyiv and other locations in Ukraine as they attempt to consolidate control over the areas they now occupy. The authors of the study said a protracted stalemate will likely result in a continuing of Moscow's bombing campaign against Ukraine's cities.

"Ukraine's defeat of the initial Russian campaign may therefore set conditions for a devastating protraction of the conflict and a dangerous new period testing the resolve of Ukraine and the West," according to the study. "Continued and expanded Western support to Ukraine will be vital to seeing [them] through that new period."

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HEADLINE	03/18 Lawsuit: scammers fake govt. fee
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/18/fake-government-fee-scam-nets-millions-small-busin/
GIST	<p>Scammers have found a new way of bilking small business owners out of millions of dollars: posing as the government.</p> <p>State of Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson, a Democrat, announced Thursday that he is suing two companies that have used the state's online public records and registration requirements to scam more than 15,000 entrepreneurs out of a total of \$1.2 million.</p> <p>The companies have cleared \$3.6 million nationally from the scam and have sent at least 210,784 letters to Washingtonians since March 2019, according to the lawsuit filed in King County Court.</p>

“Small businesses power our economy,” Mr. Ferguson said in a statement. “With this lawsuit, I intend to get the impacted business owners their money back — with interest.”

Several times each week, the complaint says, Michigan-based CA Certificate Services collects small business addresses directly from state government websites in Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Ohio, Utah, Virginia and Washington.

Using an envelope with a localized address that mimics government paperwork, the company mails a request for \$82.50 to thousands of businesses, telling them it’s for a “Certificate of Status” or workplace poster to stay registered in their state.

In its Washington mailings, the company calls itself “WA Certificate Services” and includes a state address to appear legitimate.

The lawsuit adds that another company, Labor Poster Compliance, has mailed 16,000 “bills” to Washington businesses charging them \$79.25 for a workplace labor poster it claims is mandatory. That company has cleared more than \$25,000 from the letters.

Mr. Ferguson is asking the court to make both companies pay restitution, attorneys’ fees and civil penalties of up to \$7,500 for each violation of the Consumer Protection Act.

Victimized owners are unaware the state does not charge for registration.

“One King County resident wrote that she asked the company for a refund shortly after mailing in her check in November 2019 but does not recall receiving it,” Mr. Ferguson’s office stated in Thursday’s statement.

Washington’s lawsuit follows legal proceedings that Michigan’s and Virginia’s attorneys general and the Utah Department of Commerce have brought against the scammers.

Virginia’s lawsuit against CA Certificate Services, filed last year in the Circuit Court of the City of Williamsburg, said the company poses as “VA Certificate Service” or “Virginia Certificate Service” in the state and uses the address of a UPS store that forwards payments to the scammers.

Victoria LaCivita, spokesperson for the Virginia attorney general’s office, said Friday that small business owners should always contact government agencies about any unsolicited communications to see if the supposed services are actually free.

“Businesses should be wary of any mailings, phone calls or email solicitations that appear to come from a government agency, that request a fee for filing documents with a government agency, or that request a fee for obtaining records from a government agency,” Ms. LaCivita said.

The National Federation of Independent Business, a Nashville-based association of small business owners, said Friday that scams put more pressure on entrepreneurs already struggling with pandemic-related issues.

“With inflation, worker shortages, supply chain issues, and rising fuel costs, small businesses are facing numerous challenges. Potential scams and fraud committed against small businesses make it even harder to operate, and any charges of scam and fraud should be fully investigated,” the NFIB said in an email.

CEO Alfredo Ortiz of the Job Creators Network, a conservative small business advocacy group, said smaller companies often struggle more to catch the scams.

“A larger business would have more resources, likely even some form of a legal team, to make sure they aren’t falling victim to such a scam,” Mr. Ortiz said. “But most small business owners have to wear multiple hats, manager, accountant, HR, marketing, etc.”

HEADLINE	03/20 US downplays hypersonic missile
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/20/use-hypersonic-missile-if-confirmed-not-game-chang/
GIST	<p>Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin downplayed reports that Russia has deployed hypersonic missiles in its campaign against Ukraine, telling CBS News he doesn't see such a move as a "game-changer" for the stalled invasion.</p> <p>The BBC reported that Moscow on Saturday launched a Kinzhal (Dagger) missile at an underground arms depot in western Ukraine. If the shooting is confirmed, it would amount to the first use of a hypersonic missile — capable of flying at five times the speed of sound — during a combat mission.</p> <p>On Sunday's "Face the Nation," Mr. Austin said if the hypersonic missile story turns out to be true, it's an indication that Russian President Vladimir Putin is "trying to reestablish some momentum. Is he running low on precision-guided munitions? Does he lack complete confidence in the ability of his troops to reestablish momentum?"</p> <p>The Kinzhal missile was heralded at its unveiling four years ago as one in a series of "invincible" weapons that would help Russia evade enemy defenses. It can carry both nuclear and conventional warheads. Citing recent reports, the BBC said Russian MiG-31 fighters, capable of carrying the Kinzhal missile, have been sent to Kaliningrad, bringing "numerous" European capitals within reach.</p> <p>According to the BBC, there is no indication where the Russian hypersonic missile was launched from.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/21 Day 26 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/russia-ukraine-war-what-we-know-on-day-26-of-the-invasion
GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ukraine has rejected a Russian demand for Mariupol to surrender by 5am Moscow time (2am GMT / 10pm ET) on Monday. Ukraine's deputy prime minister Iryna Vereshchuk said there could be "no talk of any surrenders" and that Russia had been informed of the response.• Russian Col Gen Mikhail Mizintsev had told the defenders of the city to "Lay down your arms". In a briefing on Sunday, he added that if the people of Mariupol surrendered, humanitarian corridors would then be opened in both the eastern and western directions from 10am Moscow time on Monday.• US president Joe Biden will travel to Poland this week to discuss international efforts to support Ukraine and "impose severe and unprecedented costs on Russia" for its invasion, the White House has said. The discussions will follow Biden's meetings in Brussels with Nato allies, G7 leaders, and EU leaders.• Biden will host a call on Monday at 3pmGMT (11am ET) with president Emmanuel Macron of France, German chancellor Olaf Scholz, Italian prime minister Mario Draghi of Italy, and British prime minister Boris Johnson.• Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskiy has said that he believes a failure to negotiate the end of Russia's invasion will mean "a third world war". He told CNN that he is "ready for negotiations" with Russian president Vladimir Putin and that "we have to use any format, any chance in order to have a possibility of negotiating".• Zelenskiy earlier called Putin's strategy a "final solution" for Ukraine. In an uncompromising address to the Israeli parliament, Ukraine's president challenged Israel over its failure to impose sanctions on Russia.• At least four people have been killed following shelling of homes and a shopping district in Kyiv, according to Reuters, citing the state emergency service. Video showed firefighters rushing to rescue people trapped in the rubble of the Retroville shopping centre in Podilskiy.• Ukraine's human rights spokesperson, Lyudmyla Denisova, said Russian troops had "kidnapped" residents and taken them to Russia. "Several thousand Mariupol residents have been deported to Russia," she said on Telegram. After processing at "filtration camps", some had

	<p>been transported to the Russian city of Taganrog, about 60 miles (100km) from Mariupol, and from there sent by rail “to various economically depressed cities in Russia”, she said.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mariupol’s city council said Russia bombed an art school where 400 civilians including children were sheltering. Petro Andrushenko, an adviser to the city’s mayor, said there was no exact number of casualties. “The city continues to be shelled both from the sky and the sea,” Andrushenko said on Telegram. • Ten million people – more than a quarter of the population – have now fled their homes in Ukraine due to Russia’s “devastating” war, the head of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, said on Sunday. And at least 902 civilians have been killed and 1,459 injured in Ukraine as of midnight local time on Saturday, the UN human rights office said. The Ukrainian parliament says 115 Ukrainian children have been killed and at least 140 more have been injured. • China’s ambassador to the US has said his country is not sending weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine. He said China was sending food, sleeping bags and other aid, “not weapons and ammunition to any party”. But pressed on US television on Sunday, he did not definitively rule out the possibility Beijing might do so in the future. • Germany has agreed a contract with Qatar for the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG) that will help the European country wean itself off its dependency on Russian energy. It could take several years for the deal to come into full effect because Germany has no terminals for selivery of LNG. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia said it was increasing oil production to meet global demand. • Turkey’s foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, has claimed a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine is “close”, despite the scepticism of western governments. But the US ambassador to the United Nations warned on Sunday there was little immediate hope of a negotiated end to the war. • Eleven Ukrainian political parties have been suspended because of their links with Russia, according to Zelenskiy. The country’s national security and defence council took the decision to ban the parties from any political activity. Most of the parties affected were small, but one of them, the Opposition Platform for Life, has 44 seats in the 450-seat Ukrainian parliament.
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HEADLINE	03/20 China scholar article: cut ties w/Putin
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/chinese-article-urging-country-to-cut-ties-with-putin-gets-1m-views
GIST	<p>When an essay from a prominent Shanghai scholar suggested China needed to cut ties with Vladimir Putin as soon as possible over the Ukraine war, the online reaction was swift.</p> <p>Despite being published late on a Friday evening in the Carter Center’s US-China Perception Monitor, Hu Wei’s essay soon gained a million views in and outside China, and was republished into Chinese blogs, non-official media sites and social media accounts.</p> <p>Then came the backlash, as the article was criticised for being “reckless and dangerous” vitriol. Personal attacks on Hu and the USCPM followed. By Sunday morning, their websites were blocked in China.</p> <p>“Usually when the government or the censors don’t like a particular article – like [something published by] FT Chinese – they’ll just block that particular article, they don’t block the website,” said Liu Yawei, the director of the China programme at the US-based Carter Center.</p> <p>“So this is highly unusual.”</p> <p>China’s position on the invasion and how far it is willing to go in supporting Russia is one of most stridently debated topics of the war, but inside China the conversation is strictly controlled, with little tolerance for dissenting views.</p> <p>“I’d read a lot of commentaries in Chinese media outlets, and Prof Hu’s article certainly disagreed with the majority of those articles,” said Liu. “Hu actually tried to say these are dangerous views ... I made the quick decision to put it out.”</p>

Published in English and Chinese, Hu's essay argued that Russia's advancement was faltering and China needed to cut ties with Putin "as soon as possible" to avoid being on the losing side and facing "further containment" from the US and the west.

"China should avoid playing both sides in the same boat, give up being neutral, and choose the mainstream position in the world," he wrote.

Since the 24 February invasion, China has struggled to navigate an awkward position as a close ally of Russia but one [unwilling to share the international condemnation](#) and economic sanctions. It has sought to hold incompatible positions respecting Ukraine's sovereignty and what it calls Russia's "security concerns". The confusion is reflected in its media and public statements.

Hu is among a number of significant Chinese voices to challenge the official line. Wang Huiyao, the president of the Beijing-based thinktank the Center for China and Globalization, [argued in the New York Times](#) that western alliances would grow stronger and closer as the war dragged on. "That is not good for China," he said, calling for the west to bring Beijing on as a mediator and "offer the Russian leader an offramp", which in turn could repair China's international standing.

The messaging from China's leadership and state media has largely presented the government as a neutral peacemaker, but blaming the US and Nato for the conflict and not criticising Russia and Putin – a key ally with whom Xi Jinping signed [a "limitless" partnership](#) shortly before the invasion.

There is an apparent effort by Chinese state media to report the facts of casualties and attacks neutrally, and directives have reportedly been issued to avoid particular stances for or against Russia and Ukraine. The dominant angle is anti-western, and government mouthpiece editorials have accused the US of fake news over claims that [China may give Russia weapons](#).

But observers have noted the evening news has avoided depicting Ukrainian victims or damage which might engender sympathy, and is still not referring to it as an "invasion". Reports and officials have also amplified [Russian disinformation and propaganda](#), including conspiracy theories that the US is funding chemical weapon-producing biolabs in Ukraine, or fake polling that [Ukrainians support the invasion](#), according to the Taiwan-based media analyst Doublethink Labs.

Foreign-facing English-language media appears to be [more inclined](#) to report on Russian atrocities and refer to it as a "war", signalling an awareness that its position on Russia is not being well received, but this too is contradicted by the disinformation and rhetoric coming from foreign officials.

"English-language publications – such as CGTN – are directed at foreigners, and operate according to an entirely different propaganda script," says Prof Carl Minzner, a China scholar and professor of law at Fordham law school. "But since those aren't directed at Chinese citizens, they aren't a good measure for evaluating how Beijing seeks to depict the conflict for its home audience."

In non-official media and social media, pro-Russian rhetoric is much more common.

The pro-Russian discourse among Chinese internet users aligns with – or perhaps was born of – the strong anti-US sentiment which has fostered in recent years, says Liu. "It is dangerously negative," says Liu, and impossible to quantify.

"That's why Hu's voice is important," says Liu. "We don't know the percentage of who he's representing but it's an important dissenting voice."

There is huge interest in the conflict and news stories are trending with hundreds of millions of views and tens of thousands of comments. Dissenting voices are there, mostly concerned about the impact on civilians. But they are few and far between, and subject to censorship.

On Friday Wang Jixian, a Chinese national in Odesa, posted two new video diaries [to YouTube](#) – a site banned in China – in which he railed against Putin, calling him a “coward” and “villain”, as well as against Putin’s supporters, and the Chinese authorities for shutting down debate.

Wang, whose videos have amassed hundreds of thousands of views, said much of his content had been “cancelled” and he had been blocked from sending messages on WeChat and from contacting his parents, who are still in China. He asked people to tell them he was still alive.

“Why are you pressuring my parents? Your power is bestowed to you by your people, with your guns and bombs, are these for you to fire at your own people? Do you like oppression that much? Come on, fire at your own citizen!” he said.

“Making up lies is the only technique and language you have, right? I know I am gonna see more rumours about me, but do you think I really care?”

Wang’s videos have drawn vitriol on the Chinese internet, including accusations of being a friend of separatists, a China-slanderer, a US-worshipper, and an embarrassment to Beijingers.

“Taking advantage of both sides, refined egoism, bah, disgusting,” said one.

Liu hopes Hu, who is still in China, is not punished for his essay.

“For scholars to express their own opinions, and [to] allow people to debate, is very important trait of any great power,” he says. “China says it’s a great power and any great power should have the self-confidence to allow healthy, vibrant discussion.”

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HEADLINE	03/21 Russia shells chemical factory; leak
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/ukrainian-town-told-to-shelter-after-shelling-causes-ammonia-leak-at-chemical-factory
GIST	<p>Residents of the northern Ukrainian town of Novoselytsya should seek shelter after shelling caused an ammonia leak at a nearby chemical factory, an official said, as intense fighting with Russian forces in the area continues.</p> <p>According to an update from the Sumy regional military administration, the site of the Sumykhimprom plant, which produces fertilisers, was shelled at 3.55am on Monday morning.</p> <p>“As a result of the shelling 1 tank with ammonia was damaged,” Ukraine’s state emergency services said in an update on its Telegram account, adding that as of 5am there was a slight leakage of ammonia.</p> <p>Rescue workers were fixing a damaged pipeline and an employee at the plant was reportedly injured.</p> <p>Sumy regional governor, Dmytro Zhyvytskyiy, said the leak was reported at 4.30am local time at the Sumykhimprom plant in an update posted to his official Telegram on Monday morning.</p> <p>Advertisement</p> <p>“As a result of Russian enemy shelling, a tank with ammonia with a capacity of 50 tonnes was damaged,” Zhyvytskyiy said, adding that there was no threat to the population of Sumy.</p> <p>He said the area within a 2.5km radius around the plant was hazardous, adding that residents should seek refuge in shelters and basements for protection while describing ammonia as a “colourless gas with a pungent suffocating odour”.</p> <p>“Ammonia is lighter than air, therefore shelters, basements and lower floors should be used for protection,” Zhyvytsky said in a Telegram message.</p>

	<p>He added that emergency crews were at the scene and prevailing winds meant the nearby city of Sumy – with a prewar population of about 250,000 – was not under immediate threat.</p> <p>According to Sumykhimprom’s website the facility produces a range of chemical fertilisers. Sumy, about 350km (220 miles) east of Kyiv, has experienced weeks of heavy fighting.</p> <p>In recent days the Russian government has intensified propaganda and disinformation efforts alleging Ukraine is preparing to use improvised chemical weapons and has been developing a clandestine weapon of mass destruction programme.</p> <p>The Russian Ministry of Defence claimed late Sunday that “nationalists” had “mined” ammonia and chlorine storage facilities at Sumykhimprom “with the aim of mass poisoning of residents of the Sumy region, in case of entry into the city of units of the Russian Armed Forces”.</p> <p>Russia has repeatedly denied helping Syria use chemical weapons in multiple attacks against its own citizens during the country’s 11-year-old civil war.</p> <p>Moscow has also denied using chemical weapons against Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny as well as ex Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 US: Russia shifts to new strategy
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-failing-to-achieve-early-victory-in-ukraine-is-seen-shifting-to-plan-b-11647824374
GIST	<p>After Russian forces failed to secure a quick victory over Ukraine, senior U.S. officials see signs the Kremlin is shifting to a new strategy to secure key territorial objectives while seeking leverage to compel the Ukrainian government to accept neutrality between Russia and the West.</p> <p>The U.S. and its allies had widely interpreted Russian President Vladimir Putin’s initial objectives to include the seizure of Kyiv in a matter of days, and the replacement of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s government with a pro-Russian regime.</p> <p>None of that has come to pass. A senior U.S. official said indications suggest more than three weeks of grueling combat—in which Ukraine has put up fierce resistance to Russian forces—has prompted Mr. Putin to adjust his tactics.</p> <p>The new assessment of Mr. Putin’s intentions, which is shared by senior officials within the Biden administration, is to compel Kyiv to accept Russian claims to Ukraine’s southern and eastern territories. Having seized both Crimea and regions of Donbas in 2014, Russia seeks to secure a “land bridge” between western Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, and to expand Russian control of the Donbas region.</p> <p>Mr. Putin would also continue his military pressure, including the pummeling of Ukrainian cities, calculating that it will lead Mr. Zelensky to abandon his hopes of joining the West and agree to a neutral status and other Russian demands.</p> <p>Should Mr. Putin’s demands for territory and neutrality be rebuffed, he is expected to try to hold all of the ground his forces have taken, and fight on, U.S. officials said. “Based on our assessments militarily, it does appear that he is reverting to siege tactics,” said another U.S. official.</p> <p>For Ukraine’s beleaguered citizens, the shifting strategy means weeks—possibly months—of attacks from a weakened Russian military often content to fire missiles and artillery from a distance, they said. This shift is designed to pressure Mr. Zelensky’s government into giving up territory and ceding security arrangements.</p>

The assessment of Mr. Putin's "Plan B," as one official called it, comes with a number of important caveats. U.S. officials note Mr. Putin might expand his war aims, should his military begin to have more success against Ukraine's forces. The status of the capital remains an open question, and given stout Ukrainian resistance, it is unclear whether the Russian military can marshal sufficient troops to tightly cordon off Kyiv and take the Ukrainian capital, some U.S. officials say.

The interpretation of Mr. Putin's strategy isn't the result of a formal intelligence community assessment, but is the view of some U.S. officials with access to classified information who are not saying the strategy will work. Some analysts note the difficulty of assessing Mr. Putin's goals and objectives, and warn against reading too much into battlefield developments.

"His objective has not changed at all," said Daniel Fried, a former senior State Department official who served as U.S. ambassador to Poland. "What has changed is his tactics."

"The quick decapitation of the Ukrainian government didn't work," Mr. Fried said. "Now he just wants to pound them because they are resisting and therefore it must be purged. It's Stalinesque."

At present, Russian forces are [faced with enormous challenges](#), including faulty logistics, a shrinking supply of precision-guided munitions and growing casualties, which could include as many as 7,000 Russian troops killed in action, according to U.S. calculations.

In Mariupol and other cities, his forces have reverted to some of the siege tactics they employed in Grozny in 1999 and 2000 during the second Chechen war when Mr. Putin rose to power as prime minister and then president.

In Chechnya, Russian forces sought to gain control of a major city in a Russian territory that is smaller than New Jersey. In Ukraine, Russia faces the challenge of trying to gain control of multiple cities in a country that had a population of 44 million before roughly 3.4 million fled Ukraine and is larger than France.

After weeks of tough fighting, Russian troops have [pushed into the streets of the port city of Mariupol](#), an important strategic objective for Moscow as it seeks to establish a corridor from the Crimean Peninsula to western Russia. Seizing control of the city would give the Russians a battlefield victory, though one achieved at a high cost.

"We've seen deliberate targeting of cities and towns and civilians throughout in the last several weeks," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Sunday to CBS News. "He's taking these kinds of steps because...his campaign is stalled."

After [initial rounds of negotiations](#), Ukraine and Russia remain far apart on key issues, including the Kremlin's demands that the Zelensky government recognize Russian sovereignty over Crimea, formally cede control of the Donbas region and renounce its longer-term aspiration to integrate with the West, including its goal of eventually joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, agreed that the Russian military had shifted its tactics on the battlefield, but said there was no indication that Mr. Putin had backed away from his maximum demands.

Mr. Putin's main purpose in agreeing to talks with Ukraine, Mr. Herbst said, was to encourage the West to offer concessions while creating the impression for the Russian public that he is open to diplomacy. The talks, he added, aren't being led on the Russian side by a top-level official.

"I think he began the negotiations at a much lower level because he realized things were not working out on the battlefield," Mr. Herbst said. "He is still trying to win the war on the battlefield, but he has in no way publicly endorsed anything other than his maximalist checklist."

	<p>President Biden is traveling to Brussels for a NATO summit on Thursday and will also participate in a European Council meeting. The trip comes as Mr. Biden has received both praise and criticism at home for his handling of the crisis. Some lawmakers continue to push a plan that would supply Soviet-built MiG-29 combat jets to Ukraine, an idea Mr. Biden and his advisers have rejected.</p> <p>Mr. Zelensky has sought to apply pressure on Mr. Biden and leaders in other countries to establish a no-fly zone to shield his country from air attacks. The U.S. and NATO nations have rebuffed that proposal and are moving to send more air defense systems to Ukraine so the Ukrainians can better defend their airspace on their own.</p> <p>Last week, Mr. Biden said the U.S. would send an additional \$800 million in security assistance to Ukraine, including Stinger anti-aircraft systems to help Ukraine defend its airspace and Javelin anti-tank missiles.</p> <p>Russia says that it has fired two hypersonic missiles in recent days in an apparent effort to show it could overcome a no-fly zone and any air defenses Ukraine might field, experts say. Mr. Austin said in his television appearance that he would neither “confirm or dispute” that the Russians had used such a weapon. But he added the missile wasn’t “a game changer.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Russia is losing young, urban professionals
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/middleeast/ukraine-russia-armenia.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>YEREVAN, Armenia — At the Lumen cafe in the Armenian capital, Russians arrive as soon as the doors open, ordering specialty coffees, opening up their sleek Apple laptops and trying to navigate a dwindling array of options for starting their lives over.</p> <p>The background music and the sunlit interior are calming counterpoints to the frantic departures from their country, where they left behind parents, pets and the sense of home that all but vanished when Russia invaded Ukraine last month.</p> <p>“This war was something I thought could never happen,” said Polina Loseva, 29, a web designer from Moscow working with a private Russian I.T. company that she did not want to name. “When it started, I felt that now, everything is possible. Already they are putting people in jail for some harmless words on Facebook. It was safer to leave.”</p> <p>This is a different kind of exodus — tens of thousands of young, urban, multilingual professionals who are able to work remotely from almost anywhere, many of them in information technology or freelancers in creative industries.</p> <p>Russia is hemorrhaging outward-looking young professionals who were part of a global economy that has largely cut off their country.</p> <p>Before the war broke out, only about 3,000 to 4,000 Russians were registered as workers in Armenia, according to officials. But in the two weeks following the invasion, at least an equal number arrived almost every day in this small country. While thousands have moved on to other destinations, government officials said late last week that about 20,000 remained. Tens of thousands more are looking to start new lives in other countries.</p> <p>The speed and scale of the exodus are evidence of a seismic shift that the invasion set off inside Russia. Though President Vladimir V. Putin repressed dissent, Russia until last month remained a place where people could travel relatively unfettered overseas, with a mostly uncensored internet that gave a platform to independent media, a thriving tech industry and a world-class arts scene. Life was good, the émigrés said.</p>

For the new arrivals in Armenia, a sense of controlled panic overlays the guilt of leaving their families, friends and homeland, along with the fear of speaking openly and the sorrow of seeing a country they love doing something they hate.

“Most of those who left oppose the war because they are connected to the world and they understand what’s happening,” said Ivan, part-owner of a Cyprus-based video game development firm. He and many other Russian exiles interviewed in Armenia said they did not want to give their full names for fear of repercussions at home.

Ms. Loseva and her boyfriend, Roman Zhigalov, a 32-year-old web developer who works for the same company that she does, sat at a table in the crowded cafe with friends who were looking for a place to stay. Dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, she leaned against Mr. Zhigalov, closing her eyes as he put his arm around her shoulder.

“A month ago, I didn’t want to move to another country,” she said. “But now, I don’t want to go back. It’s not the country I want to live in anymore.”

At other tables in the small cafe, young Russians tapped on laptops or checked their Apple watches. Some logged into Zoom meetings; others searched for places that they could afford to rent with their savings inaccessible.

But the plunge in the ruble, which at one point had lost about 40 percent of its value against the U.S. dollar, and the soaring housing costs in Armenia, which are priced in dollars, have left some who lived in stylish apartments in Moscow contemplating moves from budget hotels to even cheaper hostels with bunk beds and shared bathrooms.

Most of those who have come to Armenia work in I.T. and other sectors that rely on unfettered internet and international banking links, the country’s economy minister, Vahan Kerobyan, told The New York Times.

But among those who have fled Russia are also bloggers, journalists or activists who feared arrest under the country’s draconian new law that makes it a crime even to use the word “war” in connection with Ukraine.

Some of the recent Russian arrivals in Armenia said they have contracts that will pay them for at least a couple of months of working remotely if they can find a way to get the money. Others said they had been relocated to Armenia by U.S. and other I.T. firms, which continue to pay their salaries. But many have been left scrambling to access enough money to scrape together apartment deposits.

Visa, Mastercard and PayPal have all cut ties with Russia, leaving only the Russian Mir bank card, which is accepted in Armenia and a very few other countries, for electronic payments.

Mira, 26, who works at an aid agency, said the night before she and her boyfriend left Moscow, they went from A.T.M. to A.T.M. for three hours, unsuccessfully trying to withdraw dollars. At every cash machine, people with bodyguards would push to the front of the line and withdraw \$5,000 at a time until the machines were empty, she recalled.

“We couldn’t say anything because it felt really dangerous,” she said.

Tens of thousands of other Russian exiles have traveled to Georgia and Turkey. But Armenia, a former Soviet republic which has remained neutral in the conflict, has offered the softest landing. Unlike the reception in Georgia, none of the Russians interviewed said they had encountered hostility. Here, they can enter the country without visas or even passports and stay up to six months, and Russian is widely spoken.

For some, the anguish of leaving their country is compounded by the feeling that the world increasingly equates all Russians with their president.

“I want to be with the rest of the world, not with Russia,” said Mr. Zhigalov, the web developer. “But we cannot be with the rest of the world because it feels like being Russian now is seen as a bad thing.”

Maria, a 30-year-old Russian travel guide editor who had arrived in Armenia the previous week, also worried about the hostility.

“What do people in America think of Russians?” she asked earnestly. “Do they hate us?”

Maria said she had been involved in anti-government protests in Russia in 2018.

“I was so scared,” she said of her decision to leave with her husband, a manager of a sports training center. “I was afraid of being arrested if I went out to protest. And to live there and do nothing, I don’t want to live like that.”

Most of the Russians interviewed said they left because crushing international sanctions had made it impossible to work for companies from other countries or with foreign clients, or because they feared that Russia could close its borders.

Like many of the men who left, her husband, Evgeny, feared that he could be conscripted and forced to fight in Ukraine. The couple scrambled to find a flight out of Moscow after most airlines had cut ties with Russia, eventually spending almost all the money they had on tickets for a flight to Yerevan.

Many of those who left are entrepreneurs or freelancers in industries that relied on foreign clients, who have cut ties with them, even for work outside of Russia.

“They just tell us, ‘Sorry guys. We hope to work together in the future but right now, we cannot,’” Ivan, the video game developer, said of his European partners.

At another cafe, 35-year-old Alex, his blond hair pulled back with a hair tie and arms tattooed with milestones in his life, said he spent four hours at the Moscow airport while his flight was delayed, drinking gin and tonics.

“I just got drunk in the airport to get some courage,” he said. “I probably should have left earlier, but I’m in love with my country.”

Alex, who did not want to say what industry he worked in, said he cried as he listened to voice messages from Ukrainian friends who had been called up to fight.

“These guys were sitting around, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, playing music,” he said. “The next day, they had to go get a gun and defend their country. These were people who had never held a gun before. It’s horrible.”

For many Russians, there is also the pain of a generational divide with parents and grandparents who grew up in the former Soviet Union.

“My parents, my grandma and grandpa are watching TV and totally believing the TV line so it hurts to speak with them,” said Mira, the aid worker. “At one point, I realized I loved them too much to argue. So I said, let’s not talk about it.”

“I don’t have any stable ground under my feet,” she said. “We are here now, but we don’t know where we will be in a week or a month, or even tomorrow.”

At the Yerevan airport last week, Viktoria Poymenova, 22, and her boyfriend, Bulat Mustafin, 24, from the Russian city of Mineralnye Vody, wheeled out a tower of suitcases, bulging backpacks and two small carriers holding their small rescue dog, Mukha, and their tortoiseshell cat, Kisyia.

	<p>Mr. Mustafin, an engineer, worked as a technician for film projectors in cinemas, which are now unable to show films from Hollywood studios, since they have cut ties with Russia.</p> <p>Ms. Poymenova teaches web programming for a Cyprus-based online school. Their plan was to find an affordable apartment in Georgia.</p> <p>“If we don’t find one, we will come back here. And if we don’t find one here, we will go to Turkey. And if there is nothing, we will go to Serbia,” said Ms. Poymenova. “We just want a peaceful life, but it is very hard when your country is making such a disaster.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 US: Myanmar military committed genocide
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/us/politics/us-rohingya-genocide.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=US%20Politics
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Five years after Myanmar’s military began a killing spree against ethnic Rohingya, driving nearly one million people from their country, the United States has concluded that the widespread campaign of rape, crucifixions, and drownings and burnings of families and children amounted to genocide.</p> <p>Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken is set to announce the determination — a legal designation for crimes that American investigators documented in 2018 — at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington on Monday. It almost certainly will trigger additional economic sanctions, limits on aid and other penalties against Myanmar’s military junta.</p> <p>The Tatmadaw overthrew Myanmar’s civilian government and its nascent democratic efforts, led by the Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, in February 2021. In one of its first acts in office, the Biden administration declared that the military takeover amounted to a coup.</p> <p>But an internal debate that began during the Trump administration had, until now, delayed a decision on whether the State Department should formally accuse Myanmar of committing genocide against the Rohingya, a minority ethnic group that is largely Muslim.</p> <p>A senior State Department official confirmed the genocide determination on Sunday, after it was reported by Reuters.</p> <p>“This is a recognition of the atrocities that have occurred and of the ways in which those atrocities are manifesting themselves even today,” Anurima Bhargava, the past chairwoman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, a bipartisan panel that makes policy recommendations to the federal government, said on Sunday.</p> <p>She said that “those who committed this genocide continue to be in power.”</p> <p>The decision also comes as the Biden administration grapples with whether President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has committed war crimes for his military’s indiscriminate and deadly attacks in Ukraine, including against a maternity hospital and a theater that was sheltering children in the southeastern city of Mariupol.</p> <p>“Given what’s happening in the world, where we’re seeing what can happen if there’s power that goes unchecked, it’s a really critical time for this kind of determination to be made,” Ms. Bhargava said. “Certainly, we would have wanted something earlier.”</p> <p>In the year that Mr. Blinken and his team have been weighing a declaration, Myanmar has spiraled into a state of constant conflict and economic collapse.</p>

[Thousands of civilians from across the country have been killed by the Tatmadaw](#), fomenting a widespread uprising and a shadow government that oppose the military control. Fighting has reached every part of Myanmar, and the junta has lost control over some territory in northern Rakhine State, where the most intense atrocities against the Rohingya occurred, including violence [that intensified in August 2017](#).

At that time, Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi was Myanmar's de facto leader. Though she had been championed for years by the United States and other democratic nations, she defended Myanmar from accusations of genocide against the Rohingya during a 2019 appearance at the International Court of Justice that [tarnished her international credentials as a human-rights](#) activist.

American diplomats worried that a genocide declaration for the protection of the Rohingya would further undercut her government's steps toward democracy. Officials also feared that it would inflame animosity against the United States among other populations in Myanmar for appearing to favor the Rohingya's plight while thousands of other people are suffering under the Tatmadaw.

The Trump administration resisted the declaration in part to maintain an alliance with Myanmar to keep neighboring China off balance in the region. In 2018, the State Department quietly released a report detailing the planned and coordinated nature of widespread violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine State, resulting in mass casualties, including against religious leaders who had been singled out.

But it conspicuously did not conclude that Myanmar's military had committed genocide or crimes against humanity.

Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi now is among more than 100 elected Myanmar officials whom the country's military has arrested, and [she faces as much as 173 years in prison](#) on 17 charges that her supporters say are trumped up.

With the declaration, the Biden administration appears to have concluded that calling out the human rights abuses is more important than backing Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-democracy drive. President Biden has made both values [pillars of his foreign policy](#), and [in April went so far](#) as to [declare century-old atrocities committed against Armenians](#) by the Ottoman Empire as genocide.

Some American allies — including Canada, France and Turkey — have already declared the monthslong rampage in 2017 against the Rohingya as genocide. Gambia, acting on behalf of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation, [filed legal action against Myanmar](#) in 2019 at the International Court of Justice, accusing it of violating the U.N.'s [Genocide Convention](#).

International charges of genocide would almost certainly be brought against the military leaders who ordered the atrocities against the Rohingya and who, presumably, remain in power in Myanmar. Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi's personal culpability is less certain, Ms. Bhargava said, although "we know that those who have taken over Burma currently were in the driver's seat in terms of the many atrocities are committed in 2017."

In the nearer term, the Biden administration's new genocide determination would increase pressure on other nations and foreign companies that have even indirectly helped the Tatmadaw remain in power.

Already, two energy giants — Chevron and the France-based [TotalEnergies](#) — have committed to withdrawing from an offshore natural gas field in Myanmar that is a critical source of energy for both the host country and neighboring Thailand. Profits from the field are one of the Myanmar military's largest sources of revenue, and as recently as last year, [Chevron had lobbied the Biden administration](#) against issuing economic sanctions against the country's state-owned oil and gas industry.

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HEADLINE	03/20 In China omicron surges, economy suffers
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/asia/china-zero-covid.html

When the coronavirus first swept across China in early 2020, the country's leader, Xi Jinping, declared a "people's war" against the epidemic, launching what would become a no-holds-barred strategy to eliminate infections.

Now, in year three of the pandemic, and faced with the rise of a stealthy and rapidly spreading variant, Mr. Xi is trying to fine-tune the playbook, ordering officials to quash outbreaks — but also to limit the economic pain involved.

As China [grapples with the country's largest outbreak](#) since the pandemic began in Wuhan more than two years ago, Beijing says its measures should be more precise in scope. Officials are now promoting policies that to much of the world might either seem obvious, such as allowing the use of at-home test kits, or still extreme, such as sending people to centralized isolated facilities instead of hospitals.

But in China, where no effort has been spared to stamp out the virus, these point to a notable shift. Last week, for the first time, Mr. Xi urged officials to reduce the impact of the country's Covid response on people's livelihoods.

The adjustments are largely out of necessity. So far, the number of cases remains relatively low, and only two deaths have been reported in the latest wave. But many of the more than 32,000 cases reported across two dozen provinces in recent weeks have been of the highly transmissible BA.2 subvariant of Omicron.

The mushrooming of outbreaks around the country could quickly overwhelm the medical system if every person who tested positive were sent to a hospital, as was required until recently. It could wear down the armies of community workers and neighborhood volunteers tasked with organizing mass PCR tests for millions of people every day and checking on residents under quarantine. Lengthy, unpredictable lockdowns could wipe out the already razor-thin profits of many factories or lead to layoffs of service workers.

In his remarks to top officials last week, Mr. Xi said officials should strive for "maximum effect" with "minimum cost" in controlling the virus, reflecting concerns about the economy's [slowing growth](#). Yet his order to swiftly contain the outbreaks underscored a broader question about how far his rhetoric on controlling costs would go. On Friday, Chinese health officials emphasized to reporters that the effort to be more targeted did not amount to a relaxing of the policy.

Dali Yang, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, said Mr. Xi was signaling a "willingness to adapt and to reduce the disruptions to the economy," but not that the government was giving up control.

The ruling Communist Party's zero-tolerance approach creates high costs for officials should outbreaks occur under their watch, Mr. Yang said, pointing to the recent firings of top officials in Jilin City and a district in the city of Changchun as examples. State media reported that [more than two dozen officials](#) had been dismissed in recent weeks, accused of negligence in responding to the outbreaks.

For many in China, everyday life has been upended since the latest wave began. Tens of millions of people are now under some form of lockdown. Factories have suspended work and truck traffic has been delayed, [snarling already frayed supply chains](#). In some areas of the major metropolises of Shenzhen and Shanghai, life has ground to a halt as offices and schools have been shuttered and residents have been ordered to stay in their homes.

In Shanghai, the authorities have avoided imposing a citywide lockdown, using contact tracing instead to contain neighborhoods deemed high-risk. Still, the restrictions have hit the bottom line for businesses, such as a spicy hot pot restaurant in the upscale Xuhui district of Shanghai.

Zhang Liang, the owner of the restaurant, said his profits had plunged by more than 80 percent since the lockdowns began. He was worried about his bills.

“We’re still open, but no one is coming,” Mr. Zhang said.

The lockdown is taking a toll on residents in other ways. Tang Min, a 37-year-old gas station worker in a town in Jilin Province, was among residents ordered to stay at home. Days later, she was running out of the prescription medicine she takes to treat her depression.

She called the local government hotline, and neighborhood volunteers eventually brought her more medicine, just before she would have run out.

“When I don’t take medicine, I don’t feel like I have much to live for,” Ms. Tang said in a telephone interview.

China’s stringent virus controls still appear to enjoy widespread support, with people hoping to avoid the devastation Covid has wrought on hospitals and communities around the world. But in recent weeks, there have been signs that the public’s patience is wearing thin.

When Zhang Wenhong, a prominent infectious disease expert from Shanghai, suggested last summer that China should learn to live with the virus, he was [attacked online](#) as a puppet of foreigners. Now, people online have started debating the question of how long the measures will last. Some have even joked that the government should “[lie flat](#),” a reference to a popular term among Chinese millennials for pushing back against societal pressures by doing less.

“People seem to be increasingly fed up with these excessive anti-Covid measures,” said Yanzhong Huang, director of the Center for Global Health Studies at Seton Hall University.

But the outbreak in Hong Kong — where patients on gurneys have been parked outside hospitals and [body bags](#) have piled up in wards — has shocked many in the mainland. Charts showing high Covid death rates in Hong Kong, where many older residents are unvaccinated, have been ricocheting around Chinese social media.

The toll on older people in Hong Kong has spurred officials in China to redouble efforts to boost vaccinations among the country’s vulnerable groups. More than 87 percent of China’s population has been fully vaccinated. But among people 80 and older, just over half have had two shots, and less than 20 percent have received a booster, Zeng Yixin, a vice minister of the National Health Commission, said on Friday.

Officials have announced plans to send vaccination trucks to inoculate the many older Chinese who live in less accessible rural areas. Misinformation about the vaccines and a lack of urgency stemming from the relatively low number of cases have exacerbated the problem.

For months, Li Man, a 69-year-old housewife in Beijing, put off getting vaccinated, believing that she was at low risk for contracting the virus because she did not often go out. Eventually, at the urging of her daughter, she got the jab a few months ago. But in a telephone interview, she said she still felt it had been unnecessary.

“China’s situation is way better than in the United States or other Western countries,” Ms. Li said.

Ms. Li’s confidence points to the high stakes the government faces as it tries to calibrate its response. Beijing has touted China’s low number of deaths from the virus as a sign of the superiority of the country’s top-down, centralized system. A failure to contain the latest surge could erode the party’s legitimacy.

With each new variant, tracing the chain of transmission has become more difficult. Last month, a village near Shenzhen was locked down for nearly three weeks. The community was later cleared and the lockdown was lifted. But within a few days, cases began to emerge, and the village was placed under lockdown again.

	<p>In allowing the use of at-home test kits, officials have said that the onus was on residents to report any positive results to their local authorities. Jiao Yahui, an official with China's National Health Commission, said on Friday that people would be punished if they failed to do so, but she did not specify what the consequences might be.</p> <p>Even if the authorities succeed in quashing all infections in the current wave, it will only be a matter of time before the next outbreak, said Jin Dongyan, a virologist at the University of Hong Kong. That is why, he said, China urgently needs to come up with a road map to learn how to live with the virus.</p> <p>"It's the only option," Mr. Jin said. "It's almost impossible now to come back to zero."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Violence rages Sudan Darfur 2 decades on
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/19/world/africa/sudan-darfur.html
GIST	<p>KRINDING, Sudan — A soot-streaked shell is all that remains of Awatif Fadl's house, destroyed a year ago when gunmen riding camels, horses and motorcycles stormed through Krinding, a remote camp in Darfur, western Sudan, firing their weapons and burning every home in sight.</p> <p>Dozens of people were killed, including nine members of Ms. Fadl's family. Thousands fled, some across the border to Chad. "Nobody came to save us," she said.</p> <p>Now, Ms. Fadl, 54, has returned to the camp, where her family has built a rough shelter in the ruins of their old home. But they feel no less vulnerable. If the gunmen return, she added, "there will still be nobody to save us."</p> <p>This is not what was supposed to happen in Darfur, a region tormented by two decades of genocidal violence that began in 2003 and led to the deaths of as many as 300,000 people. In 2019, a popular uprising ousted Sudan's longtime ruler, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, and many Darfuris participated in that revolution, hoping it would finally bring peace to their region.</p> <p>Instead, the situation has only deteriorated. Violent attacks against largely ethnic African communities have surged in the past year, with more than 420,000 people forced to flee their homes in 2021, up from 54,000 a year earlier, according to the United Nations humanitarian affairs office in Sudan.</p> <p>The atrocities in Darfur once drew international attention. Celebrities organized marches and fund-raisers and even went on hunger strike, the United Nations repeatedly denounced the violence and sent in peacekeepers, and the International Criminal Court opened investigations into accusations of genocide and war crimes.</p> <p>But this time, few people are paying attention.</p> <p>"The world has forgotten about Darfur once again," said Rebecca Hamilton, an associate professor of law at the American University in Washington and the author of "Fighting for Darfur."</p> <p>Aid agencies are struggling to raise funds for Darfur as the world's attention turns elsewhere, said Duncan Riddell, the Darfur area manager for the Norwegian Refugee Council. Last year, the crises in Ethiopia and Afghanistan dominated the concerns of Western donors — both now eclipsed by Ukraine.</p> <p>Among the reasons for the escalating violence: The United Nations-backed peacekeepers withdrew from the Darfur region 15 months ago.</p> <p>At least 700 people were killed or wounded in armed attacks in Darfur last year, the United Nations estimates, though other organizations say that figure drastically undercounts the real toll.</p>

The troubles are partly driven by [continuing turmoil](#) in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, where a power-sharing deal between civilian and military leaders collapsed last fall when the army [seized power](#) in a coup. Since then, [demonstrators have mounted rolling protests](#) in Khartoum and other cities, often clashing with the security forces who have killed 87 people, according to a doctors' group.

Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan is the main winner from the chaos. Back in the 2000s, he was a [notorious figure in Darfur](#) as a commander of the Arab militia known as the Janjaweed, which perpetrated some of the worst attacks against ethnic African communities — violence that earned Mr. al-Bashir [an indictment at the International Criminal Court](#).

Now General Hamdan is the second most powerful leader in Sudan, a position he acquired as leader of the Rapid Support Forces, a powerful paramilitary group that is part of the government forces. Most recently, he [appeared in Moscow](#) on the first day of the war in Ukraine [seeking aid](#) from the Russian government.

Since coming to power, he made some efforts to forge peace in Darfur, his home region, most notably through a peace agreement in October 2020 that saw an alliance of rebel factions in Darfur [lay down their weapons](#). But as the political struggle in Khartoum deepened, the violence in Darfur resumed, sometimes driven by General Hamdan's own men, according to interviews with almost a dozen witnesses, as well as U.N. officials.

General Hamdan's office did not respond to requests for comment.

The violence [has been most serious](#) in West Darfur, one of the five states that make up Darfur. In areas like Kereneik and Jebel Moon, where dozens of [people have been killed](#) since November, [including 17 people on one day this month](#), insecurity is preventing aid agencies and journalists from gaining access — making it difficult to get firsthand accounts of the crisis, or to bring it to the world's attention.

The most vulnerable locations are camps in places like Krinding, where ethnic Africans like Ms. Fadl's family have been living since they were displaced in the first wave of state-sponsored genocidal violence in the 2000s.

In interviews, members of a dozen families in Krinding said that the camps were attacked last year by hundreds of Arab gunmen whom, they asserted, had the backing of plainclothes paramilitary officers from the general's Rapid Support Forces.

Others said that the military and the police watched and did nothing as the gunmen wreaked havoc.

After the attack, members of the Arab community blocked roads in the region, demanding the camps be dismantled — an effort, the families said, to seize the land for themselves. Tensions have been running high since the October 2020 accord, which stipulated that [refugees had a right to land](#) they lost during the conflict in the early 2000s.

Some of those interviewed said that they continue receiving calls warning them not to return. Arab gunmen, they said, also convey threats through youngsters fetching water or firewood. Others said that foreigners from Niger, Chad and the Central African Republic had been moved onto their land.

"They want to finish us," said Ahmed Suleiman, 45, who said that 20 relatives were killed in attacks in the past two years.

People in the camps are being expelled to make room for a free-trade zone that would serve Darfur and neighboring countries, which General Hamdan and state officials are spearheading with financial backing from the United Arab Emirates, according to a senior aid official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Other factors are at play, too. Age-old grievances between African farmers and nomad Arab herders center on natural resources as well as land. Herders say that the routes they traditionally used during the seasonal

migration of animals have been converted into agricultural land, resulting in clashes over access to water and ever-smaller parcels of drought-prone pastures.

“The Arabs are not all Janjaweed,” said Hamid al-Nadir, an Arab leader in West Darfur, adding that clashes had led to the slaughter of thousands of their goats and camels.

The violence is also driven by a recent influx of fighters and funds from Libya, where many Darfuris have fought as mercenaries in recent years, U.N. officials said. Non-Arab communities have begun forming self-defense militias to repulse attacks. And the federal government seems helpless to stop the violence, with [small altercations at markets](#) often snowballing into huge attacks.

“Even the most petty of infractions or disagreements are now sorted out with a round of warfare,” said Magdi el-Gizouli, a fellow at the Rift Valley Institute, a research group.

In West Darfur, those fleeing attacks have mostly [sought refuge](#) in the state’s capital, El Geneina, camping in whatever open space they can find in schools, hospitals and government buildings.

Ibrahim Mohamed’s family was one of dozens squatting in the headquarters of the regional education ministry. The conditions were tough, with limited food and clean water, and filthy latrines, Mr. Mohamed, 55, said. But his main concern was [another attack on El Geneina itself](#).

He pointed to a group of children, playing in a corner. They rarely left the compound, he said, because they were so traumatized by previous armed raids that left mental and physical scars. “They don’t trust anyone,” he said.

Sudan’s rulers in Khartoum are “relaxing and enjoying themselves,” Mr. Mohamed said. “But we have nothing.”

The departure in December 2020 of the joint United Nations and African Union peacekeeping force left a security gap, too. Local leaders and [human rights organizations cautioned](#) against the force’s withdrawal and argued that civilians remained in danger. But the Security Council maintained that Sudan’s transitional government was capable of taking over security duties in the region.

The local leaders were right. Now the United Nations has been left calling on Sudanese authorities to stop the fighting — but that call has come too late, Ms. Hamilton of the American University said.

[Looting and violence](#) have continued in recent weeks and months, even as the army chief, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and General Hamdan, both visited Darfur.

Sitting in her desolate compound on a recent afternoon, Ms. Fadl explained her decision to return, despite the risks.

She was tired of being on the run, she said, and of the “humiliation” brought on by displacement, like waiting in line for water to perform the ritual washing before the five daily Islamic prayers. Now, although her family was struggling to get by — they lacked even warm clothes to brave the chilly nights — they felt a sense of purpose.

“They keep killing us,” she said. “But we are one people and we can live together.”

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HEADLINE	03/21 Hong Kong lifts flight bans from 9 countries
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/21/world/asia/hong-kong-flight-bans.html
GIST	Hong Kong announced on Monday that it would lift its ban on flights from nine countries on April 1, just one of the restrictions it plans to relax as experts and government officials say the worst of an Omicron-driven wave might have passed.

Hong Kong's leader, Carrie Lam, said on Monday that vaccinated residents would only have to quarantine for seven days, down from 14, upon arrival from overseas. The isolation for travelers had been one of the strictest in the world and had discouraged many from returning to the Chinese territory of 7.4 million people.

She also suspended plans to have every person in the city undergo P.C.R. testing and moved up a deadline to receive booster shots to May 31. The extra dose will be necessary to enter public places, including supermarkets and shopping malls.

For most of the pandemic, Hong Kong has sealed itself off from the rest of the world and required travelers to quarantine for as long as three weeks in a hotel, mirroring policies in mainland China.

Then, as the Omicron variant spread rapidly across the world early this year, the government banned flights from the United States, Australia, Britain, Canada, France, India, Nepal, Pakistan and the Philippines in an attempt to keep virus numbers close to zero. When flights resume from those nine countries in April, only vaccinated residents will be eligible to return.

Even though the new measures remain some of the strictest in the world, Hong Kong's approach appears to be diverging slightly from that of mainland China. Two of China's largest cities, Shanghai and Shenzhen, remain in lockdown, and millions of residents there are required to undergo P.C.R. testing in an effort to bring case numbers back to zero.

More than 5,000 people have died from Covid in Hong Kong, and more than one million cases have been recorded since January. Researchers estimate that [nearly half of the city](#) may have been infected by the virus.

The lifting of flight bans comes at the behest of experts, including Gabriel Leung, dean of the University of Hong Kong, who said last month that [residents are more at risk of infection from community transmissions than from imported cases](#).

The Hong Kong government has lurched from one policy to another in tackling the fast-moving Omicron outbreak. Mrs. Lam, the city's leader, said Monday that she would suspend plans for mandatory Covid testing, weeks after rumors of a concurrent lockdown triggered waves of panic buying and an exodus from the city.

Schools were closed for an early "summer holiday" in February, in part because officials planned to use campuses for mass testing sites. Mrs. Lam said there was no longer a "road map" to conduct mass testing with the outbreak still raging, but she would not rule out that option in the future.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Austria reintroduces indoor mask mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/europe/austria-indoor-mask-mandate.html
GIST	<p>Austria will reintroduce an indoor mask mandate, the health minister, Johannes Rauch, announced on Friday, bucking a trend among European countries to lift coronavirus precautions despite rising cases. "It was simply necessary to take countermeasures now," Mr. Rauch said at a news conference on Friday, just weeks after Austria lifted its mask mandates in most indoor spaces.</p> <p>Earlier this month, Austrian officials had announced that the nation's general vaccine mandate would be temporarily suspended. It recently took official effect, but enforcement had not begun. About 74 percent of Austrians are fully vaccinated, according to the Our World in Data.</p> <p>But Mr. Rauch said that experts have now corrected forecasts for the trajectory of the virus and that officials were concerned about staffing and the availability of beds in hospitals and retirement and nursing homes.</p>

Starting on Wednesday, FFP2 masks (Europe's equivalent to American N95s) will be required in indoor spaces again, and the government would soon revise the isolation rules for infected people, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection said in a [statement](#) on Friday.

[A highly transmissible Omicron subvariant, BA.2](#), is contributing [to the new surge around Europe this month](#). Although deaths have continued to fall in the region, the number of Covid patients in hospitals has risen in some European countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Austria, according to [Our World in Data](#).

Over the past two weeks, new cases in Austria have increased by 54 percent, according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.

But European countries have nonetheless been pushing to reopen. Last month, [Denmark dropped](#) all its restrictions, including a mask mandate in indoor spaces and on public transportation. The British government has [ended](#) all remaining legal coronavirus curbs in England, including the legal requirement for infected people to isolate. On Thursday, [Italy announced](#) it would progressively lift its vaccination and health pass requirements.

But as countries greeted the end of many precautions, Austria's announcement was a concerning signal that momentum in that direction may have been premature. Mr. Rauch said that earlier policy changes were based on predictions that cases would be dropping by now.

"That has not come true. It has changed, and changed significantly," he said.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Is Taiwan next?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/briefing/taiwan-china-ukraine-russia.html
GIST	<p><i>A fragile peace</i></p> <p>Russia's invasion of Ukraine has amplified fears that the world is teetering back to a Cold War-like era in which the most powerful countries compete for dominance.</p> <p>That could mean not only Russia exerting control over Eastern Europe but also China imposing itself over East and Southeast Asia — particularly Taiwan.</p> <p>China has laid claim to Taiwan since the island split off from the mainland in 1949 and has threatened to forcibly reunite the two. It views the issue as a top priority: Days after Russia's invasion, Chinese officials reiterated that they were committed to "resolving the Taiwan question." In a Friday call with President Biden about Russia's invasion, China's leader, Xi Jinping, seemed more concerned about the fate of Taiwan than the war in Ukraine.</p> <p>China, like Russia, appears to see a void after Western powers pulled back from the world stage, sidelined by internal disputes and the failed U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the West, a Cold War victory had convinced many that a new democratic world order would keep the peace — without realizing how fragile that peace really was.</p> <p>"People forgot about great power politics," said Jennifer Lind, an expert on East Asia at Dartmouth College. "People had hoped we had transformed international politics, and we didn't."</p> <p>But Russia's failure so far to overpower Ukraine, and the West's rush to punish and isolate Russia for its invasion, should make great or rising powers skeptical of similar incursions, experts said.</p> <p>China, after all, has benefited from the relatively peaceful world order of recent decades; it transformed into the only real economic rival to the U.S. as the world became increasingly integrated. An invasion of Taiwan could disrupt that order and potentially isolate China from the global economy, as Russia's experience has shown.</p>

So what happens in Taiwan will likely be influenced by what happens in Ukraine. If Russia succeeds in overtaking Ukraine, it increases the danger for Taiwan. If Russia ultimately retreats, or suffers lasting, damaging consequences, that could be good news for the island.

Why China might hesitate

Because Russia's invasion has gone poorly, Chinese officials are likely to be more cautious about sending troops into Taiwan, said Liang-chih Evans Chen at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research in Taiwan.

That would be a relief for Taiwan, an island of almost 24 million people with a strong liberal democracy — it is the only Asian government to legally allow same-sex marriages — and a modern economy.

Taiwan does not expect that it could outright defeat China's powerful military, especially without direct help from the U.S. Taiwan's aim, instead, is to make a war look so costly for China that it is deterred from invading.

The war in Ukraine has shown how this could play out. Ukrainian resistance has been fiercer than anyone expected — killing thousands of Russian troops, according to U.S. estimates. The same could prove true in Taiwan, where polls [find](#) that nearly three-quarters of the population is willing to fight a Chinese invasion.

The West's sweeping sanctions on Russia also suggest that an invasion of Taiwan could result in economic pain for China. Along with the weapons shipped to Ukraine, the sanctions show Western countries' willingness to support democracies that are under attack.

The West's resolve could go even further in Taiwan, with the possibility of U.S. forces directly intervening against an invasion. Biden has said American troops will not fight in Ukraine, but the U.S. keeps a [deliberately vague line](#) on Taiwan.

China's advantages

China has strengths that Russia does not. Its economy is far bigger and more diversified, cushioning the damage that sanctions could inflict. The countries that would stand to impose sanctions on China, from the U.S. to European nations to Japan, are generally more reliant on trade with China than they are on trade with Russia.

Unlike Ukraine, Taiwan is not recognized globally as an independent country — not even by the U.S. — potentially leading to questions about whether China's attack would be an invasion at all.

China also has an [enormous military advantage](#), with about a million active-duty ground troops, compared with Taiwan's 88,000. (Although, unlike Russia, China would have to cross 100 miles of water to invade — a difficult, complex undertaking.)

The reaction to Russia's invasion has also exposed some limits in how far the West is willing to go, with countries declining to send troops to defend Ukraine. And the U.S.'s ambiguity on Taiwan leaves room for American forces to stay out of combat.

Most important, China has time: Any invasion of Taiwan could be years away, if it happens at all, experts said. That gives China time to build up its military, insulate its economy from possible sanctions, study what Russia got wrong in Ukraine and see whether Western resolve actually holds.

The return of great power politics, then, could hinge on the outcome of the war in Ukraine — and whether it was ultimately worth it from Russia's perspective.

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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/03/20/world/covid-19-mandates-cases-vaccine?name=styl-coronavirus&region=hub&block=storyline_live_updates_block_recirc&action=click&pgtype=LegacyCollection#hospitalizations-of-young-children-with-the-virus-surged-during-the-us-omicron-wave
GIST	<p>Babies and children younger than age 5 were hospitalized with coronavirus at much higher rates during the latest U.S. surge, when the highly transmissible Omicron variant was dominant, compared with earlier periods in the pandemic, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Hospitalizations of these children were about five times higher during the Omicron surge, between Dec. 19 and Feb. 19, than during the period when the Delta variant was dominant, between June 27 and Dec. 18. Rates of admission to intensive care also rose dramatically among young children, reaching a peak on Jan. 8 of this year.</p> <p>Children of color younger than age 5 wound up in hospitals at disproportionate rates. Only one-third of the children were white, while 28 percent were Hispanic and 23 percent were Black. Hispanic people represent just 18 percent of the population, and Black Americans make up 13 percent.</p> <p>(Six percent of these hospitalizations were among Asian or other Pacific Islander children, about the same as their representation in the population.)</p> <p>Experts say children of color are infected at higher rates because they are more likely to have parents who work in public-facing jobs, and more likely to live in poverty and in multigenerational households.</p> <p>Though hospitalization rates for young children are still relatively low, compared to the rates among older Americans, the virus poses special risks to young children and especially to babies.</p> <p>Infants six months old and younger were the most vulnerable, representing nearly half of the hospitalizations among young children during the Omicron period. They were hospitalized at rates about six times as high at the peak of the Omicron surge, compared with the peak of the Delta wave. Two infants died, the C.D.C. found.</p> <p>“People should know there are risks to children under 1 that are pretty serious, especially during surges, and they might want to take extra precautions to reduce exposure,” said Julia Raifman, an assistant professor of health law, policy and management at Boston University School of Public Health, who was not involved in the research.</p> <p>More than 1,000 children younger than age 18 have died of Covid since the pandemic started, including 350 children under 5. But experts also worry about the long-term effects, as well as multisystem inflammatory syndrome, a rare but serious condition.</p> <p>The C.D.C. study found that most of the children and babies who were hospitalized — about two-thirds — were healthy and did not have underlying medical conditions, as has been the case throughout the pandemic.</p> <p>No Covid vaccines are currently authorized in the United States for children younger than 5, and the regulatory process has been fraught with delays and setbacks. Public health experts strongly recommend that anyone who comes into regular contact with young children get vaccinated.</p> <p>“To help protect children too young to be vaccinated, everyone ages five and older, including pregnant women, family members and caregivers, should stay up to date with Covid-19 vaccines,” Dr. Kristin J. Marks, the study’s first author and an epidemic intelligence service officer with the CDC, said in an email.</p> <p>The study, published on March 15, examined hospitalizations of children in counties in 14 states whose catchment areas represent about 10 percent of the U.S. population.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Firefighters gain ground on Texas wildfires
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/firefighters-hope-to-gain-ground-on-texas-wildfires-saturday/
GIST	<p>EASTLAND, Texas (AP) — Fire crews in Texas made progress Saturday against a massive complex of wildfires that have killed a deputy sheriff and burned at least 50 homes, officials said.</p> <p>“Progress has been made, but fire activity has picked up with rising temperatures and lower humidity,” said Matt Ford, spokesperson for Texas A&M Forest Services. He said about 25% of the flames were contained, up from about 4% late Friday as the fire burned thick brush and grass fields.</p> <p>The fires had burned about 130 square miles (330 square kilometers), including about 70 square miles (185 square kilometers) in the Eastland Complex, according to the agency. That area is around 120 miles (193 kilometers) west of Dallas.</p> <p>Gusty winds were expected to return Sunday, again raising the wildfire threat to critical levels in western and central Texas, Ford said.</p> <p>“We are predicting weather severity to increase” Sunday, said Ford. “Fire activity may increase based on weather conditions (but) containment lines are holding” thus far.</p> <p>The National Weather Service forecast for the area called for high temperatures in the low 80s on Sunday with winds of 15-20 mph (24-32 kph) and gusts up to 30 mph (48 kph).</p> <p>The forecast also calls for a 90% chance of rain on Monday, which Ford said would be welcome, but the winds could shift and drive the fire in another direction.</p> <p>“Any kind of water source or rain is going to be beneficial,” in extinguishing the flames, Ford said. “We’ll hope for the best and prepare for the worst.”</p> <p>Gov. Greg Abbott said late Friday that at least 50 homes had been destroyed by flames with more possibly to be found. He declared a disaster in the 11 counties hardest hit by wildfires. The Texas A&M Forest Services warned that fires could also affect parts of Oklahoma and Kansas, and Nebraska and warned of an extreme fire risk in those states.</p> <p>The Eastland County Sheriff’s Office released more details on the death of Deputy Sgt. Barbara Fenley. In a statement, the office said she was going door to door, getting residents to evacuate their homes Thursday and it was “last heard that she was going to check on an elderly individual.”</p> <p>“With the extreme deteriorating conditions and low visibility from smoke, Sgt. Fenley ran off the roadway and was engulfed in the fire,” the sheriff’s statement said.</p> <p>About 18,000 people live in Eastland County and about 475 homes were evacuated in the area, Ford said.</p> <p>“We do have assessment teams on the ground investigating exactly how many homes were lost,” Ford said.</p> <p>Several months of dry, windy weather have fueled deadly wildfires in Kansas and Oklahoma, including one a few weeks ago. In remote, western Nebraska ranching country, a large wildfire has been burning for several days. Meteorologists said they were hopeful that the expected rain showers early next week across the Plains would reduce the risk.</p> <p>The fires caused hazy conditions hundreds of miles away and prompted automated phone messages from the Houston Fire Department and the city’s Office of Emergency Management on Friday alerting area residents to smoke and ash.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Oregon still faces drought conditions
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/nation-world/oregon-heads-into-spring-with-much-of-the-state-still-facing-drought-conditions-end-of-winter-northwest-us-portland-international-airport-average-rainfall
GIST	<p>PORTLAND, Ore. (KATU) — As of Sunday, the United States is officially done with winter and the spring season has begun.</p> <p>With Oregon now in its third drought year, the Portland metro area had some welcome news: above average rainfall in the fall and winter months.</p> <p>"There was above average precipitation for the winter so that was actually pretty good. So we're doing pretty good for the northwest corner of the state," said Larry O'Neill, Oregon State climatologist.</p> <p>There were 97 days with measurable rain at the Portland International Airport from Oct. 1 through March 19, three more days than the average. The total inches of recorded rain was slightly above average as well. At last check on the U.S. Drought Monitor, the northwest corner of Oregon is the only area in the state without some level of drought.</p> <p>In 2022, the state is carrying more than two years of drought and all of the harmful effects. <i>"In those places in central Oregon and southern Oregon, we're going to expect severe water supply issues including lack of irrigation water," O'Neill said. "These multi-year droughts, this is just very unusual in historical records."</i></p> <p>Parts of Oregon are under high levels of drought, and it's only March.</p> <p>"We're entering this summer in worse shape than we have in the last two summers," said O'Neill.</p> <p>In Washington, about half the state is under moderate drought, but its severity is far less than Oregon. With the precipitation deficit, a decent rainy day in the Pacific Northwest doesn't provide as much benefit to the environment as it used to.</p> <p>"We're still wondering if this is just bad luck or this is a symptom of climate change or something like that. We still don't [have] the answer to that, even though climate change is contributing to just the drying out of the landscape, because as you warm the atmosphere, you evaporate more water," O'Neill said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Putin lies to justify Russia war
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/asia/russia-putin-propaganda-media.html
GIST	<p>In the tense weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24, Russian officials denied that it planned anything of the sort, denouncing the United States and its NATO allies for stoking panic and anti-Russian hatred. When it did invade, the officials denied it was at war.</p> <p>Since then, the Kremlin has cycled through a torrent of lies to explain why it had to wage a “special military operation” against a sovereign neighbor. Drug-addled neo-Nazis. Genocide. American biological weapons factories. Birds and reptiles trained to carry pathogens into Russia. Ukrainian forces bombing their own cities, including theaters sheltering children.</p> <p>Disinformation in wartime is as old as war itself, but today war unfolds in the age of social media and digital diplomacy. That has given Russia — and its allies in China and elsewhere — powerful means to prop up the claim that the invasion is justified, exploiting disinformation to rally its citizens at home and to discredit its enemies abroad. Truth has simply become another front in Russia’s war.</p> <p>Using a barrage of increasingly outlandish falsehoods, President Vladimir V. Putin has created an alternative reality, one in which Russia is at war not with Ukraine but with a larger, more pernicious enemy in the West. Even since the war began, the lies have gotten more and more bizarre, transforming</p>

from claims that “true sovereignty” for Ukraine was possible only under Russia, made before the attacks, to those about migratory birds carrying bioweapons.

Russia’s message has proved successful domestically, where the Kremlin’s claims go unchallenged. Surveys suggest a majority of Russians support the war effort. Internationally, the campaign has seeped into an information ecosystem that allows them to spread virulently, [reaching audiences](#) that were once harder to reach.

“Previously, if you were sitting in Moscow and you wanted to reach audiences sitting in, say, Idaho, you would have to work really hard doing that,” said Elise Thomas, a researcher in Australia for the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, referring to [disinformation campaigns](#) dating to the Soviet Union. “It would take you time to set up the systems, whereas now you can do it with the press of a button.”

The power of Russia’s claim that the invasion is justified comes not from the veracity of any individual falsehood meant to support it but from the broader argument. Individual lies about bioweapons labs or [crisis actors](#) are advanced by Russia as swiftly as they are debunked, with little consistency or logic between them. But supporters stubbornly cling to the overarching belief that something is wrong in Ukraine and Russia will fix it. Those connections prove harder to shake, even as new evidence is introduced.

That mythology, and its resilience in the face of fact-checking and criticism, reflects “the ability of autocrats and malign actors to completely brainwash us to the point where we don’t see what’s in front of us,” said Laura Thornton, the director and senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund’s Alliance for Securing Democracy.

The Kremlin’s narratives today feed on pre-existing views of the war’s root causes, which Mr. Putin has nurtured for years — and restated in [increasingly strident language](#) last week.

The strategy to deceive, or at least confuse, international observers was used after the bombing of a maternity ward in Mariupol on March 9.

Twitter and Facebook eventually removed the posts, but gruesome photographs, stamped “Fake,” continued circulating across the internet, including on the chat app Telegram.

Another meme gained even more traction, relying on a yearslong campaign in Russia to stoke unfounded fears that the United States was manufacturing biological weapons in Ukraine.

When Russia took such claims to an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council, however, it faced withering criticism. “Russia has today brought into the Security Council a series of wild, completely baseless and irresponsible conspiracy theories,” the British representative, Barbara Woodward, told the Council. “Let me put it diplomatically: They are utter nonsense.”

Russia’s accusations about nefarious American activities in Ukraine date back decades, resurfacing in new forms with each new crisis, like the political upheaval in 2014 that led to Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

Ukraine is waging an information campaign of its own, aiming to discredit Russia, exaggerate its own military successes and minimize its losses. It has also circulated false reports of heroism, including the martyrdom of soldiers defending an island in the Black Sea and the exploits of an ace fighter pilot in the skies over Kyiv.

By most accounts, Ukraine has so far been winning the information war, led by a powerful social media operation that flooded the internet with its own jumble of anecdotes and myths, bolstering morale among Ukrainians and uniting the Western world behind its cause. The most central figure in their campaign has been [President Volodymyr Zelensky](#) himself, whose video messages to Ukrainians and the world have combined bravery with the stage presence of the television performer he once was.

Russia, though, has more tools and reach, and it has the upper hand with weaponry. The strategy has been to overwhelm the information space, especially at home, which “is really where their focus is,” said Peter Pomerantsev, a scholar at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University who has [written extensively](#) about Russian propaganda.

Russia’s propaganda machine plays into suspicion of the West and NATO, which have been vilified on state television for years, deeply embedding distrust in Russian society. State media has also more recently echoed beliefs advanced by the QAnon movement, which ascribes the world’s problems largely to global elites and sex traffickers.

Those beliefs make people feel “scared and uncertain and alienated,” said Sophia Moskalenko, a social psychologist at Georgia State University. “As a result of manipulating their emotions, they will be more likely to embrace conspiracy theories.”

Mr. Putin’s public remarks, which dominate state media, have become increasingly strident. He has warned that nationalist sentiment in Ukraine is a threat to Russia itself, as is NATO expansion.

Yet when the invasion began, it seemed to catch the organs of the propaganda apparatus unprepared. Officials and state media had just spent weeks accusing the Biden administration of exaggerating what Russia claimed were simply regular military exercises, not the buildup of an invasion force.

“Clearly, they did not prepare the information warfare machine,” Mr. Pomerantsev said. “It takes months to prepare something like this.”

That could explain the changing, disjointed nature of Russia’s campaign. The threat of biological weapons in Ukraine — let alone secret American weapons factories producing them there — was not cited as a rationale for the “special military operation” that Mr. Putin announced at dawn on Feb. 24. These falsehoods emerged only later.

“They throw stuff out and they see what works,” said Ms. Thomas, the researcher from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. “And what’s really working for them at the moment is the biolabs stuff.”

The Kremlin’s campaign has gone beyond simply propagating its message. It has moved [swiftly to silence dissenting points of view](#) that could cut through the fog of war and discourage the Russian population.

For now, the campaign appears to have rallied public opinion behind Mr. Putin, according to most surveys in Russia, though not as high as might be expected for a country at war.

“My impression is that many people in Russia are buying the government’s narrative,” said Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center. “They have doctored images on state-controlled media. Private media don’t cover the war, fearing 15 years in prison. Same goes for people on the social media. Russia has lost information warfare globally, but the regime is quite successful at home.”

The question is for how long.

Cracks have [appeared](#) in the information fortress the Kremlin is building.

A week after the invasion began, when it was already clear the war was going badly for Russian troops, Mr. Putin rushed to enact a law that punishes “fake news” with up to 15 years in prison. Media regulators warned broadcasters not to refer to the war as a war. They also forced off the air two flagships of independent media — Ekho Moskvyy, a liberal radio station, and Dozhd, a television station — that gave voice to the Kremlin’s opponents.

Access to Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and most recently Instagram has also been severed inside Russia — all platforms the country’s diplomats have continued to use outside to misinform. Once spread, disinformation can be tenacious, even in places with a free press and open debate, like the United States,

	<p>where polls suggest that more than 40 percent of the population believes the 2020 election was stolen from former President Donald J. Trump.</p> <p>“Why are people so surprised that this kind of widespread disinformation can be so effective in Russia when it was so effective here?” Ms. Thornton of the German Marshall Fund said.</p> <p>As the war in Ukraine drags on, however, casualties are mounting, confronting families in Russia with the loss of fathers and sons. That could test how persuasive the Kremlin’s information campaign truly is.</p> <p>The Soviet Union sought to keep a similar veil of silence around its decade-long quagmire in Afghanistan in the 1980s, but the truth seeped into public consciousness anyway, eroding the foundation of the entire system. Two years after the last troops pulled out in 1989, the Soviet Union itself collapsed.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Ukraine rejects demand to surrender
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/03/20/world/ukraine-russia-war
GIST	<p>Ukraine rejected a demand to surrender the city of Mariupol by 5 a.m. Monday, as Russian forces broadened their bombardment of the strategic port and forcibly deported thousands of residents, according to city officials and witnesses.</p> <p>Iryna Vereschuk, a deputy prime minister of Ukraine, told Ukrainska Pravda that her country rejected the Russian demand for surrender. She called on Russia to open a humanitarian corridor in Mariupol so thousands of civilians trapped with little food or water can escape.</p> <p>Military experts now describe the war as a bloody stalemate, with Russian troops appearing to lose ground around Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, while making some gains in the east.</p> <p>Russia is increasingly turning to long-range missiles and targeting civilians as Ukraine stifles its ground campaign, despite Russia’s superior manpower and weaponry. Mariupol has become a grim symbol of Russian brutality and frustration.</p> <p>The situation there deteriorated even more over the weekend, with reports of Russian forces successfully conquering three neighborhoods and Russian naval vessels shelling the city.</p> <p>Among the latest targets in Mariupol was an art school, where about 400 residents were hiding, according to city officials who claimed it had been bombed by Russian forces targeting civilians. The number of casualties was not known.</p> <p>The week ahead was shaping up to be a busy one for members of the reinvigorated NATO alliance, which is holding an emergency summit in Brussels on Thursday. Poland said it would propose a peacekeeping mission in Ukraine at the meeting, an idea that is at odds with the alliance’s official stance and one the United States rejected on Sunday.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Chernobyl 64 workers rotate out
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/03/20/world/ukraine-russia-war#after-about-600-hours-64-workers-at-the-chernobyl-plant-have-been-relieved
GIST	<p>After more than three weeks without being able to leave the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in northern Ukraine, 64 workers were able to be rotated out, the plant said on Sunday.</p> <p>Staff at the plant, which includes more than 200 technical personnel and guards, had not been able to rotate shifts since Feb. 23, a day before Russian forces took control of the site, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, which serves as a nuclear watchdog for the United Nations.</p>

In a [Facebook post](#), the plant said that to rotate the 64 workers, 46 volunteers were sent to the site to make sure operations at the plant could continue. It was unclear whether the remaining workers would also have an opportunity to be rotated.

For weeks, the International Atomic Energy Agency, known as the I.A.E.A., has expressed concern for the workers at the Chernobyl site, calling for the staff to be rotated for their safety and security.

Rafael Mariano Grossi, director general of the I.A.E.A., said on [Sunday](#) that the workers “deserve our full respect and admiration for having worked in these extremely difficult circumstances.”

“They were there for far too long,” he said. “I sincerely hope that remaining staff from this shift can also rotate soon.”

The [I.A.E.A. said](#) on March 13 that workers were no longer doing repairs and maintenance, partly because of “physical and psychological fatigue.”

In a Facebook [post](#) last week, the plant said that there were enough food supplies and that “fortunately, everyone is alive and well.”

Workers at the site have faced a number of issues recently, including a power outage and limited communication. Ukrainian government officials said on March 9 that damage by Russian forces had “disconnected” the plant from outside electricity, leaving the site dependent on power from diesel generators and backup supplies. Power was restored a few days later, and the plant resumed normal operating conditions.

Earlier this month, after Russian forces took command of the plant, the I.A.E.A. said that it had received a report from Ukraine’s nuclear regulator that it was only able to communicate with the workers through email.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Kyiv galvanized: solidarity, defiance
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/europe/ukraine-war-kyiv.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — The historic center of Kyiv, usually bustling with tourists and souvenir stalls around its pastel-colored buildings and golden domed churches, is largely deserted these days. Shops and offices are closed, and the city, placed under curfew from 8 p.m., falls dark and silent at night.</p> <p>Nearly half the population left the city through the first weeks of war in a chaotic exodus that blocked the roads and swamped the central train station. But just as many people remained — an estimated two million. Some stayed because they did not have the means to leave, or a place to go to, but others did so from a sense of patriotism or a newfound defiance in the face of the Russian invasion.</p> <p>People were still out walking their dogs in a park by St. Andrew’s Church, above the Dnieper River on Sunday morning, even as the sound of heavy bombardment rolled like thunder from the northern suburbs of the city.</p> <p>“I don’t want to leave,” said Galina Sizikova, 48, an architect who was walking her husky near the central St. Sophia’s Cathedral. “I have a lot of opportunities to do something to help.” Her daughters were grown up and had gone to stay with relatives in Vienna and she had stayed behind with her dog, Avrora.</p> <p>She was spending her time sewing, making bulletproof vests for volunteers who have signed up to join the territorial defense forces. “A lot of friends went to fight,” she said. “My hobby is sewing so I went into production.”</p> <p>The people who had stayed in the neighborhood had bonded, she said. “We became closer,” she said. “Even those who were not friendly before, we are together now. Some prepare food.”</p>

The invasion has galvanized the population, fostering a unity that few had felt before; spawning enthusiasm for volunteering and solidarity for the men fighting, but also a stubborn refusal to be cowed by the invader.

“The Ukrainian people have been reborn,” said Oleg Sentsov, a filmmaker who was imprisoned in Russia for his opposition to the annexation of the Crimea peninsula from Ukraine in 2014. Mr. Sentsov said he evacuated his family to western Ukraine and joined the territorial defense within a day of the invasion, and he has already been serving in the suburbs of Kyiv.

“Of course the war is terrible,” he said, “and many people are dying but there is a feeling that our nation is being born and our connections to Russia are being cut.”

The day after a missile smashed into the yard of their apartment building on the north side of the city, an army of volunteers turned out with brooms and dumpster trucks to clean up the debris.

Three volunteers were helping Viktor Chernyatevich, 75, sweep up the shattered glass in his fifth-floor apartment. He escaped by a miracle as he was standing in his hallway at 8.01 a.m. when the missile struck, but his apartment caught the full brunt of the explosion, its balcony sheared off and his belongings were wrecked.

He had sent his daughter and grandchildren to take refuge in Poland in the first days of the war, but like many working-class Ukrainians he stayed to guard his property.

“Who would be here to turn off the water and gas?” Mr. Chernyatevich said. Even after the damage from the explosion, he said he would remain in the apartment and had canvas ready to cover the shattered windows. “I was a construction worker, I can do these things,” he said.

His neighbors said they would stay as well. “We are rooted in Kyiv, married for 38 years,” said Frida Maslovska, 71, standing at her door wrapped in a woolen scarf and hat. The explosion shook the walls like an earthquake, she said, but her husband was opposed to leaving. “He says we should support people,” she said. Asked what she wanted, she smiled and answered, “I would like to live here, in my apartment, my ugly apartment.”

Mr. Chernyatevich was one of the few prepared to contemplate a long, grim war.

“The longer it goes on, the more Ukrainians will lose, and the more Russians will lose,” he said. “And then we will come to a solution and say, ‘Why do we have a war?’”

At the site of another missile strike where firefighters had to evacuate people from a burning building, the mayor, Vitali Klitschko, said people had refused his offer to evacuate them to safety and asked for weapons instead. A former world heavyweight boxing champion, Mr. Klitschko said that the Russian airstrikes were creating more anger in the population.

“Nobody feels safe right now in the whole Ukraine, not just in the capital,” he said, “but I tell you, right now, people don’t want to leave,” he said. “And those people do not just want to stay in Kyiv. They are ready to defend our city.”

For days volunteers and security forces have been rescuing people from the northern suburbs of Kyiv that are under bombardment, ferrying them to checkpoints on the edge of the city where buses take them to overnight shelters.

Disheveled, eyes staring with shock, they described a harrowing ordeal of living for days without water, electricity and heating, with diminishing food supplies as mortar and artillery fire landed closer.

“We should have left in the first days,” said Valentin Tkachenko, 67, who was evacuated on Thursday with his wife, teenage children and a neighbor.

“No one thought it would be so bad. They said it would take a while for Russian troops to come.”

Beside him, a pensioner sat nodding happily as she ate her way through thick slices of bread handed her by a volunteer. Another woman said she had not wanted to leave because she owned a dog and 11 cats. Eventually, she was forced to go and left the animals behind.

Many of those rescued from Irpin, Bucha and other war-torn suburbs in recent days have been old and infirm, some barely able to walk unaided, an indication that a large percentage of those who remain in the capital may not have the means or ability to escape. Pensioners are often out in the streets, waiting in line at the banks to draw their pension payments, or shopping at grocery stores.

Kyiv has not suffered the same level of destruction of some of Ukraine’s cities — such as Kharkiv, Mariupol, Chernihiv and Mykolaiv — and some residents said they were confident that the city had good air defenses, but Russian attacks have been increasing. Two cruise missiles seemed to pierce the defense system, causing devastating damage in two districts last week, and others have been intercepted but the remnants have killed people and damaged buildings where they fell.

The Kyiv City Council announced last week that 228 people have died and more than 900 have been wounded in three weeks of war in the capital. Four of the dead were children.

“It’s not a good joke, but it’s absolutely like Russian roulette,” said Vyacheslav Ostapenko, 55, who works for a Ukrainian TV network, Channel 5. He and his partner, Iryna Popova, a puppeteer and author of children’s stories, are among the many middle-class professionals who chose to stay in Kyiv.

Mr. Ostapenko said his parents and sister, a documentary film director, were also still in Kyiv, one of his reasons to stay. The couple had spent three weeks sleeping in the corridor, away from the windows, so they had avoided injury but the apartment was no longer safe.

“I want to stay in Ukraine but the question now is where?” he said.

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HEADLINE	03/19 New Covid czar brings visibility, scrutiny
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/covid-19-czar-dr-ashish-jha-brings-visibility/story?id=83529850
GIST	<p>A little over a year ago, the U.S. pandemic response was all about the COVID-19 vaccine rollout. The focus was on getting vials and needles to cities and towns, far and wide, as quickly as possible.</p> <p>Jeff Zients was deemed the right man for the job of White House coronavirus response coordinator because he had a reputation as a savvy businessman who could cut bureaucratic red tape.</p> <p>So on Thursday, when the White House announced Zients was stepping down in April and that Dr. Ashish Jha, a leading public health voice, would be the new face of the federal coronavirus response, it emphasized the recent shift in the nation's pandemic strategy to a phase that's more about preparedness and communication rather than maximizing operational effort.</p> <p>Jha, the dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, initially stepped into the spotlight during the pandemic as a doctor with straightforward advice and predictions about the pandemic. He has at times been a daily presence on television, including on ABC News, and he's been applauded for giving candid answers about what people should do to stay safe. On Twitter, his takes on the latest pandemic news have garnered him hundreds of thousands of followers.</p> <p>Brown University announced that Jha will take a short-term leave from the School of Public Health for the temporary White House special assignment.</p>

For the White House, Jha's popularity is a selling point in the face of a growing communications problem for the Biden administration, under whom the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has been criticized for being too slow and vague in its guidance on issues like masking recommendations and quarantine timelines. And as the country moves away from masks, administration officials say Jha's deft communication skills will be an important asset in light of a potential resurgence in cases from the BA.2 variant.

If mask guidance changes, Jha will be at the forefront of explaining why Americans should put them back on.

He'll also be at the helm while experts at the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration consider whether Americans will need a second round of booster shots, and at what point shots will be authorized for those under five years old, which vaccine companies expect to happen sometime this spring.

During the course of the pandemic, Jha -- who is a practicing internist in New England in addition to working in academia -- has already racked up some government experience, participating in congressional hearings on the national pandemic response and advising the Biden White House on the National COVID-19 Preparedness Plan.

He's also been tied to the Washington circuit through consulting work -- including work with one firm that some experts have criticized for the opaque nature of its client lists, raising questions regarding potential conflicts of interest. Listed as a "senior advisor" at the boutique international consulting firm Albright Stonebridge Group, Jha is the latest addition to a long list of senior Biden administration officials who have previously worked at consulting firms with murky client lists.

Many such officials have disclosed much of their consulting work as part of their obligatory financial disclosures -- and Jha, as an incoming member of the White House team, is required to disclose his past employment and sources of income, along with his personal finances, within 30 days of assuming his role.

But the specifics of Jha's work for Albright Stonebridge might not be part of that disclosure unless he discloses the work as part of his ethics agreement -- because Jha says he did not get paid for his work at the firm. Officials are only required to include in their personal financial disclosures clients that have paid them more than \$5,000 for their services.

Last year, when news of his work with the group circulated on Twitter, Jha wrote that he had advised the group on "pandemic preparedness," but not for a fee: "In 2020, I volunteered for Madeline Albright's group (got paid \$0) to advise on their work around future pandemic preparedness," Jha said.

The arrangement could present the appearance of a conflict of interest in Jha's new role, said Delaney Marsco, ethics legal counsel for the Washington-based nonprofit Campaign Legal Center. But to what extent would depend on Jha's specific clients, the nature of his consulting work, and what he will be working on while in government, Marsco said.

"Positions that are more honorary and passive are less likely to raise a conflict or even an appearance," Delaney told ABC News. "If he was directly working on issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic for a private company with a significant interest in the government's current response, there is heightened concern. More disclosure can help us assess the potential for conflict."

When contacted by ABC News for a comment from Jha, Mahrokh Irani, an associate director in the Brown University School of Public Health's dean's office, said that "Dr. Jha was an unpaid advisor for ASG from June, 2020 to February, 2022. Dr. Jha provided to ASG his views on the latest developments in the pandemic and how to be prepared. His work was unrelated to Pfizer, Merck or pharmaceutical company IP issues."

Of his work for Albright Stonebridge, Jha also said on Twitter in May 2021: "Do dozens of these kinds of things. Happy to put together list of everyone I advise/talk to. I'll do that." However, records and social media searches suggest that Jha has not yet publicly released a list of his private consulting clients.

Representatives for Albright Stonebridge Group declined to comment to ABC News.

White House officials say that Jha will undergo extensive ethics training as he joins the administration, as every new hire does.

"While we can't comment on specific past affiliations, as a White House employee, Dr. Jha will receive rigorous ethics counseling on his obligations under federal ethics law and the Biden-Harris Ethics Pledge, and will follow all applicable ethics and recusal requirements to prevent any conflicts of interest or even the appearance of a conflict, including with respect to his past affiliations," a White House official said in a statement.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Russia ultimatum to Mariupol: surrender
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/live-updates/russia-ukraine/?id=83390885
GIST	<p>Russian forces are continuing their attempted push through Ukraine from multiple directions, while Ukrainians, led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, are putting up "stiff resistance," according to U.S. officials.</p> <p>The attack began Feb. 24, when Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a "special military operation."</p> <p>Russian forces moving from neighboring Belarus toward Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, have advanced closer to the city center in recent days despite the resistance. Heavy shelling and missile attacks, many on civilian buildings, continue in Kyiv, as well as major cities like Kharkiv and Mariupol. Russia also bombed western cities for the first time this week, targeting Lviv and a military base near the Poland border.</p> <p>Russia has been met by sanctions from the United States, Canada and countries throughout Europe, targeting the Russian economy as well as Putin himself.</p> <p>Russia has given Ukrainian forces in the besieged city of Mariupol until Monday at 4 a.m. local time to surrender, according to reports.</p> <p>Gen. Col. Mikhail Mizintsev, a senior Russian commander, warned the city's local authorities, including the mayor, that if they do not surrender they will face a "military tribunal," according to Russian state media.</p> <p>He called on the official authorities in Kyiv to "see reason" and to cancel orders given earlier that he said oblige Ukrainian fighters "to sacrifice themselves and to become the 'martyrs of Mariupol.'"</p> <p>Russian forces have been trying to push deep into Mariupol, engaging in street-to-street fighting while indiscriminately bombarding the city. Ukrainian troops defending the city are believed to be under severe pressure right now.</p> <p>Mizintsev said Russia has proposed opening humanitarian corridors beginning at 9 a.m. Monday to allow Ukrainian troops and civilians to leave Mariupol.</p> <p>He claims Russia's goals in the city are "purely humanitarian" and repeated Russia's false claims that it was Ukrainian "nationalist" forces that have destroyed several major civilian buildings, which in reality have been struck directly by Russian air and missile strikes.</p>

	<p>“We call on the units of the Ukrainian armed forces, the battalions of the Territorial Defense, foreign mercenaries, to cease military action, lay down their arms and to leave for the territories controlled by Kyiv via the humanitarian corridors agreed with the Ukrainian side,” Mizintsev reportedly said.</p> <p>“Moreover, the safe exit of all those laying down their arms is guaranteed and the sparing of their lives.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Day 24 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/19/russia-ukraine-war-what-we-know-on-day-24-of-the-invasion
GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poland has proposed for the European Union to implement a total ban on trade with Russia, prime minister Mateus Morawiecki has said. “Poland is proposing to add a trade blockade to this package of sanctions as soon as possible, (including) both of its seaports... but also a ban on land trade. Fully cutting off Russia’s trade would further force Russia to consider whether it would be better to stop this cruel war,” Morawiecki said. Earlier this week EU member states agreed on a fourth package of sanctions against Russia. • Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy says the time has come for peace talks, warning that it will otherwise take generations for Russia to recover from losses suffered during the war. He released a video address saying Ukraine wanted meaningful and honest negotiations with Moscow on peace and security without delay, Reuters reported. “The time has come for a meeting – it is time to talk.” Zelenskiy said Russian forces were deliberately blocking humanitarian supplies to cities under attack. Britain’s Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, warned that talks could be a “smokescreen,” adding: “what we’ve seen is an attempt to create space for the Russians to regroup”. • Ten humanitarian corridors have been agreed on with Russian for the evacuation of citizens, according to Ukraine’s deputy prime minister, Iryna Vereshchuk. Reuters reported that Vereshchuk said a corridor had been agreed for the besieged city of Mariupol, although the authorities’ previous efforts to evacuate civilians there under a temporary ceasefire have mostly failed, with both sides trading blame. About 350,000 civilians are stranded in the city with little food or water. • Fighting has reached the centre of the besieged Ukrainian city of Mariupol, where 350,000 civilians have been stranded with little food or water. The Russian defence ministry said its forces were “tightening the noose” around the city, and that “fighting against nationalists” was taking place in the city centre. Mariupol’s mayor, Vadym Boichenko, said fighting was “very active”. Hundreds of people remain buried under the rubble of a theatre that was hit by a Russian airstrike on Wednesday, Zelenskiy said. In a video address, he said more than 130 people had been rescued so far. • Ukraine’s position is unchanged in talks with Russia, Ukrainian negotiator Mykhailo Podolyak said. Earlier today, a member of Russia’s negotiating team said Moscow and Kyiv were most aligned on Ukraine’s neutrality and giving up on joining Nato. Podolyak accused Russian statements of attempting “to provoke tension in the media”. • Russia says it has used a hypersonic weapon for the first time, to destroy an underground military depot in western Ukraine. Hypersonic missiles are fast weapons that can evade detection by missile defence systems. The defence ministry said it had destroyed a large underground depot for missiles and aircraft ammunition in the Ivano-Frankivsk region. The missiles would have been deployed to warn Ukraine and the west that it “has the means to escalate” the conflict further, said Dr James Bosbotinis. • The former UK prime ministers Gordon Brown and Sir John Major are among those calling for the creation of a new international tribunal to investigate Vladimir Putin and those who helped plan his invasion of Ukraine. They have joined a campaign – along with leading names from the worlds of law, academia and politics – aiming to put the Russian president and others on trial. • Ukraine’s interior minister told Associated Press it would take years to find and defuse all of the unexploded ordnance from the country. Denys Monastyrsky said: “A huge number of shells and mines have been fired at Ukraine and a large part haven’t exploded. They remain under the rubble and pose a real threat. It will take years, not months, to defuse them.”

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, praised Fox News for its coverage of the war in Ukraine during an in-studio interview with the Russian state-controlled RT network. "We know the manners and the tricks that are being used by the western countries to manipulate media ... If you take the United States, only Fox News is trying to present some alternative point of view," he said. • The Kyiv city administration said on Saturday that 222 people had been killed in Kyiv since Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February, including 60 civilians and four children. It said in a statement that a further 889 people had been wounded, including 241 civilians and 18 children, in the capital. The Guardian has not been able to verify these figures. • The US president, Joe Biden, described to China's president, Xi Jinping, in a phone call today "implications and consequences" if Beijing provides material support to Russia as it attacks Ukrainian cities and civilians, the White House said. "The Ukraine crisis is something that we don't want to see," Xi was quoted by Chinese media as saying to Biden. • The European Union is considering creating a solidarity fund for Ukraine. The plan was announced on Friday and is meant to be used for people's basic necessities. An EU official told Reuters the creation of the fund would be discussed at a summit of EU leaders next week. • Russian forces are "holding captive" a Ukrainian journalist, Victoria Roshchyna, according to the Ukrainian media outlet Hromadske. In a statement, Hromadske said it believed Roshchyna was detained by the Russian FSB around 15 March. • Six and a half million people are currently displaced within Ukraine, the UN said on Saturday, nearly twice as many as have managed to flee the country. The new figure, which dwarfs the 3.3 million refugees who have entered mainly EU territory, is a big jump on the UN's last estimate of 1.85 million. • Vladimir Putin praised Russian "unity" over what the Kremlin is calling its special operation in Ukraine during a rare public speech at the national stadium in Moscow. As Putin was finishing his speech, the broadcast was suddenly cut off and state television showed patriotic songs. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov blamed a "technical failure". • A World Food Programme (WFP) official said on Friday that food supply chains in Ukraine were collapsing, with a portion of infrastructure destroyed and many grocery stores and warehouses now empty. Jakob Kern, WFP emergency coordinator for the Ukraine crisis, also expressed concern about the situation in "encircled cities" such as Mariupol. • Pope Francis has denounced the "perverse abuse of power" on display in Russia's war in Ukraine and called for aid to Ukrainians, whom he said had been attacked in their "identity, history and tradition" and were "defending their land". Francis' comments were some of his strongest yet
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HEADLINE	03/20 US not optimistic about Ukraine talks
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/zelenskiy-biden-us-ukraine-talks-russia-putin-china-nato
GIST	<p>Joe Biden's ambassador to the United Nations warned on Sunday there was little immediate hope of a negotiated end to the war in Ukraine, as pressure continued to build on the US president ahead of a crucial Nato summit in Europe this week.</p> <p>Linda Thomas-Greenfield was reacting on CNN's State of the Union to an interview with Volodymyr Zelenskiy in which the Ukrainian president told the same network only talks would end the war and its devastating toll on civilians.</p> <p>"We have to use any format, any chance, to have the possibility of negotiating, of talking to [Russian president Vladimir] Putin," Zelenskiy told Fareed Zakaria, the host of GPS. "If these attempts fail, that would mean that this is a third world war."</p> <p>Thomas-Greenfield said she saw little chance of a breakthrough.</p>

“We have supported the negotiations that President Zelenskiy has attempted with the Russians, and I use the word attempted because the negotiations seem to be one-sided, and the Russians have not leaned in to any possibility for a negotiated and diplomatic solution,” she said.

“We tried before Russia decided to move forward in this brutal attack on Ukraine and those diplomatic efforts were not responded to well by the Russians, and they’re not responding now. But we’re still hopeful that the Ukrainian effort will end this brutal war.”

The Nato secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, told NBC’s Meet the Press: “Turkey is doing some real effort to try to facilitate, support talks between Russia and Ukraine. It’s far too early to say whether these talks can lead to any concrete outcome.”

Biden, who faces growing dissatisfaction over his approach to the war, will travel to Brussels on Thursday. He will hear a proposal from Poland for Nato to send a peacekeeping force into Ukraine, something Thomas-Greenfield said was unlikely.

“I can’t preview what decisions will be made and how Nato will respond to the Polish proposal,” she said. “What I can say is American troops will not be on the ground in Ukraine at this moment. The president has been clear on that.

“Other Nato countries may decide that they want to put troops inside of Ukraine, that will be a decision that they have made. We don’t want to escalate this into a war with the United States but we will support our Nato allies.”

Thomas-Greenfield was asked about reports that thousands of residents of the besieged city of Mariupol have been deported to Russia.

“I’ve only heard it,” she said. “I can’t confirm it. But I can say it is disturbing. It is unconscionable for Russia to force Ukrainian citizens into Russia and put them in what will basically be concentration and prisoner camps.”

Republicans were critical of the pace and content of US support for Ukraine. Following Zelenskiy’s address to Congress on Wednesday, the White House announced \$800m in military aid, following a \$13.6bn package. But Biden has rejected a no-fly zone and the transfer of Polish Mig fighter jets.

“The president has had to be pushed and pulled to where he is today,” the Wyoming Republican senator John Barasso told ABC’s This Week.

“It was Congress that brought about sanctions, that brought about the ban on Russian oil, that brought about weapons and all of this big aid package. So far the administration has only released \$1bn of that. We might not have been in this situation if they had done punishing sanctions before the tanks began to roll.”

Speaking to CBS’s Face the Nation, the Senate minority leader, Mitch McConnell, said he believed Biden “needs to step up his game”.

The president, McConnell said: “has generally done the right thing but never soon enough. I am perplexed as to why we couldn’t get the Polish-Russian Migs into the country.”

McConnell added that Biden should visit friendly countries close to the conflict zone, such as Romania, Poland, and the Baltic nations.

“They’re right on the frontlines and need to know that we’re in this fight with them to win,” he said.

McConnell also condemned Republican extremists who have opposed support for Ukraine, such as the North Carolina congressman Madison Cawthorne, who has called Zelenskiy “a thug”.

“There are some lonely voices out there who are in a different place,” McConnell said.

Concern is rising among Biden’s allies. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the Democratic Senate whip, reiterated the call to approve air support for Ukraine.

“We’re asking for one-third of the Polish air force to be sent into Ukraine,” he told ABC. The people of Poland, of course, want to make certain that they’re safe. They’re only a few miles away from the devastation that’s going on in Ukraine.

“There are other ways for us to provide surface-to-air missiles and air defenses that will keep the Russians at bay in terms of their aerial attacks. There are ways to do that that are consistent with the Nato alliance and would not jeopardise expanding this into world war three or even worse.”

Marek Magierowski, the Polish ambassador to the US, stressed that the proposal for a peacekeeping force in Ukraine was only “a preliminary concept”.

“We can’t take any decisions unilaterally, they have to be taken by all Nato members,” he told CNN, adding: “If there is an incursion into Nato territory, I believe that Russia can expect a very harsh response on the part of our alliance.”

Zelenskiy lamented the provision only of economic and limited military support.

“If we were a Nato member, a war wouldn’t have started,” he said. “If Nato members are ready to see us in the alliance, do it immediately because people are dying on a daily basis.

“But if you are not ready to preserve the lives of our people, if you just want to see us straddle two worlds, if you want to see us in this dubious position where we don’t understand whether you can accept us or not, you cannot place us in this situation, you cannot force us to be in this limbo.”

Zelenskiy, however, appeared to acknowledge last week that Ukraine would not join Nato.

On CBS’s Face the Nation, the US defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, said the use of chemical weapons by Russia, which many analysts predict, would produce a “significant reaction” from the US and the international community.

On NBC, Stoltenberg said the use of chemical weapons “would be a blatant and brutal violation of international law”. But he would not say such an outcome would change Nato policy towards intervention.

Biden this week spoke to the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, seeking to prevent support for Russia. The Chinese ambassador to the US, Qin Gang, spoke to CBS.

He said: “What China is doing is sending food, medicine, sleeping bags and baby formula, not weapons and ammunition to any party.”

Gang also said Chinese condemnation of the Russian invasion, for which some have called, would not “solve the problem”.

“I would be surprised if Russia will back down by condemnation,” he said.

In Ukraine, fighting continues. The retired US army general and former CIA director David Petraeus told CNN the conflict had reached “a bloody stalemate, with lots of continued damage on both sides, lots of destruction, especially from the Russians”.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Day 25 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/russia-ukraine-war-what-we-know-on-day-25-of-the-invasion

GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, urged Israeli legislators to help protect Ukraine against the Russian invasion, drawing comparisons between the Russian offensive and the “final solution” – the plan by Nazi Germany to exterminate Jews. • Mariupol’s city council says Russia bombed an art school where 400 civilians, including children, were sheltering. • Thousands of residents of Mariupol have been forcibly deported to Russia, and then sent by rail to various cities where they have to remain for at least two years, Ukraine’s human rights ombudsman has claimed. • Ten million people – about a quarter of the pre-war population – have now fled their homes in Ukraine due to Russia’s “devastating” war, the head of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, said. • One of Europe’s largest metallurgical facilities, the the Azovstal steel plant in Mariupol, has been destroyed by the Russians, Vadym Denysenko, adviser to Ukraine’s interior minister, said. • Russia has struck Ukraine with cruise missiles from ships in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, and launched hypersonic missiles from Crimean airspace, the Russian defence ministry said. • An attack on a marine barracks in the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv on Friday killed more than 40 marines, according to the New York Times. If confirmed, it would be one of the deadliest known attacks on Ukrainian forces during the war. • At least 902 civilians have been killed and 1,459 injured in Ukraine as of midnight local time yesterday, the UN human rights office (OHCHR) said. • The Ukrainian parliament says 115 Ukrainian children have been killed and at least 140 more have been injured. • Pope Francis has described what is happening in Ukraine as “inhumane and sacrilegious”. Addressing tens of thousands of people in St Peter’s Square for his weekly Sunday address and blessing, he called on leaders to stop “this repugnant war”. • A shell exploded outside an apartment block in Kyiv, wounding five people, the mayor of the city said on Sunday. • Turkey’s foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, has claimed that a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine is “close”, despite the scepticism of western governments. • Eleven Ukrainian political parties have been suspended because of their links with Russia, according to Zelenskiy.
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HEADLINE	03/20 Pakistan PM steps up criticism of West
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/pakistan-imran-khan-criticism-west-confidence-vote
GIST	<p>Addressing the crowds at a public rally in Punjab last week, Pakistan’s prime minister was on the attack. Western leaders, Imran Khan said, treated Pakistan as their “slave” and presumed that “whatever you say, we will do”.</p> <p>Days before, it had been announced that Khan would be facing a vote of no confidence in parliament at the end of March, after more than 100 members of Pakistan’s united opposition successfully tabled a motion to oust him. The vote will take place on Friday 25 March.</p> <p>The prime minister’s opponents, who have put aside their own differences to unite in an anti-Khan coalition, have accused him of bad governance and economic incompetence as inflation has soared and Khan has appeared to lose the backing of the military establishment credited with bringing him to power in the first place.</p> <p>As he fights for his political life, however, Khan has turned to a strategy he hopes will win him support, even as his government’s popularity is nosediving: brazen bashing of the west.</p> <p>He was particularly scathing of a recent request by diplomats of 22 countries, including EU member states, who jointly called on Pakistan to support a resolution in the United Nations general assembly condemning Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.</p>

Khan, who has been trying to cultivate a closer relationship with Russia in defiance of the west and was in Moscow on the day of the invasion – saying it was an “exciting time” to be there – point-blank refused, expressing only “concern” at the situation.

According to a narrative being pushed by Khan and ministers close to him, the vote of no confidence is part of a conspiracy by foreign powers in the west, and even the CIA, to topple his government, which is no longer willing to support the actions of the west and Nato as they did during the “war on terror”.

This week, Pakistan’s human rights minister, Shireen Mazari, tweeted, and then deleted, a message accusing the opposition of using “external powers for their devious games”.

On Monday, the foreign minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, told a press conference he had intelligence that the vote of no confidence against Khan was happening at the behest of western powers.

“I have more information than this,” Qureshi said cagily, adding that he would only reveal it once he had the green light from the prime minister.

Michael Kugelman, the deputy director of the Asia programme and senior associate for south Asia at the Wilson Centre, said it made “good political sense for Khan to ramp up the anti-west rhetoric”, which would be likely to fire up his support base, who are widely mistrustful of the west, particularly the US, after the heavy price paid by Pakistan during the “war on terror” and amid increasingly hostile US-Pakistan relations.

“If he loses power, he can blame the west and use that as a rallying cry to draw support to prepare for a fresh bid at power,” said Kugelman. “And if he stays in power, he can boast that he defied the west’s efforts to undermine him and use that as momentum to push toward getting elected to a second term.”

Khan’s anti-western rhetoric has also been taken as a sign of the prime minister’s concerns that the vote of no confidence poses a real threat to his ability to stay in power and become the first prime minister in Pakistan to complete a full term in office.

Pakistan’s powerful military, which retains a large amount of power and influence even in a civilian government, is considered by many as largely responsible for Khan’s election win in 2018, though they have denied any involvement. In recent months, however, there has been an apparent widening gap between Khan and the military establishment and it is thought that he will no longer be able to rely on their backing behind the scenes in the vote of no confidence.

An armed forces spokesperson distanced the military from the vote entirely, saying: “I have said it earlier that the army has nothing to do with politics. It is better for all of us to avoid unnecessary speculation on this matter.”

While Khan currently has a majority in parliament with his coalition partners, the opposition claims that it has the backing of at least 20 lawmakers from the ruling party and its allies. That would be enough to lose Khan the vote, currently scheduled for 25 March. Even allies of Khan’s have admitted he could be facing defeat.

Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry told a news conference that they rejected “this culture of turncoats”.

“We are clear that we will not get into any blackmailing to save our government,” said Chaudhry.

Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, the speaker of Punjab’s assembly, who is close to Khan, said: “The united opposition has more numbers than needed. Many surprises will come in the coming days.”

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, an author and associate professor of political economy at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, said it was no surprise in this moment of political strife that Khan was leaning on anti-western tropes, and in particular the narrative that western civilisation poses a direct threat to Islam.

“Having said this, it is nevertheless a fact that Pakistan’s political and economic history has been shaped by western imperialist powers,” said Akhtar. “Whether there is any direct intervention by western governments to ease Imran Khan out of power is something we will know for sure only in the due course of time.”

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HEADLINE	03/20 ‘Likely’ Covid surge; ‘but not dangerous’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/20/us-covid-cases-new-variant-fauci
GIST	<p>The US is likely to see an increase in Covid cases like that in Europe and the UK thanks to the BA.2 virus subvariant but not a dangerous surge, Anthony Fauci said on Sunday.</p> <p>Joe Biden’s chief medical adviser also said the US was “clearly going in the right direction” on the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>BA.2, Fauci told ABC’s This Week, “has a degree of transmission advantage over the original Omicron [variant], but not multifold advantage. So, it’s about 50% to 60% or so more transmissible, which means ultimately it might take over as a dominant variant.</p> <p>“Clearly, throughout the world it’s about 80-plus percent, 85% of the isolate. In the United States, it’s still somewhere around 30%.</p> <p>“So it does have an increased transmission capability. However, when you look at the cases, they do not appear to be any more severe and they do not appear to evade immune responses either from vaccines or prior infection.</p> <p>“So the bottom line is we likely will see an uptick in cases as we’ve seen in the European countries, particularly the UK, where ... they have BA.2. They have a relaxation of some restrictions such as indoor masking and there’s a waning of immunity.</p> <p>“Hopefully, we won’t see a surge. I don’t think we will. The easiest way to prevent that is to continue to get people vaccinated. And for those who have been vaccinated, to continue to get them boosted.”</p> <p>Fauci said he did not see any reason to reimpose public health restrictions relaxed under a federal approach meant to focus on areas with pressure on hospital systems.</p> <p>“But you always have to have the flexibility,” he said.</p> <p>“Remember, when the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] came out with the modification of their metrics, which would lead to the guidelines of what regions or counties in the country should have a masking indoors, they made it very clear that ... if we do see a significant surge, particularly one that might result in increased hospitalisations, we have to be prepared to pivot and perhaps reinstitute some of those restrictions.</p> <p>“But right now, at this point, I don’t see that.”</p> <p>More than 970,000 people have died of Covid-19 in the US. Fauci said vaccination and booster rates still needed to be improved and said Congress should build-up supplies of anti-virals, tests and booster shots. “We just can’t stand still,” he said, “particularly as we appear to be in somewhat of a lull ... where cases continue to come down, deaths continue to come down and hospitalisations [too].</p>

	<p>“That’s no time at all to declare victory because this virus has fooled us before, and we really must be prepared for the possibility that we might get another variant and we don’t want to be caught flatfooted on that.”</p> <p>Fauci, 81 and the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, has served seven presidents since 1984. He has said he will consider retiring when the pandemic is done.</p> <p>Asked if he was any nearer such a decision, he told ABC: “I’m not so sure. I want to make sure we’re really out of this before I really seriously consider doing anything different.</p> <p>“We’re still in this. We have a way to go. I think we’re clearly going in the right direction. Hope we stay that way.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Russia mercenaries, extremists in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/russian-mercenaries-in-ukraine-linked-to-far-right-extremists
GIST	<p>Russian mercenaries fighting in Ukraine, including the Kremlin-backed Wagner Group, have been linked to far-right extremism including an organisation designated by the US as terrorist, analysis reveals.</p> <p>Although Vladimir Putin says his “special military operation” is aimed at the “denazification” of Ukraine, an investigation has found links between pro-Russian forces and violent rightwing extremism, including those directly affiliated with Wagner.</p> <p>One post on the messaging app Telegram, dated 15 March, shows the flag of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), a white-supremacist paramilitary organisation which the US lists as terrorist, allegedly flown by Moscow-backed separatists in Donetsk. The post was shared by a pro-Putin channel.</p> <p>Much of the extremist content, posted on Telegram and the Russian social media platform VKontakte (VK), relates to a far-right unit within the Wagner Group called Rusich with others linked to pro-Kremlin online communities, some bearing the name and logo of Wagner Group.</p> <p>Adam Hadley, the executive director of Tech Against Terrorism, a London-based initiative supported by the UN counter-terrorism executive directorate, said their analysis indicated that Russian-backed forces in Ukraine, including the Wagner Group, are “almost certainly connected with extreme far-right organisations”.</p> <p>Hadley added: “Given Putin’s absurd demands for the ‘denazification’ of Ukraine, we suggest he should first root out neo-Nazis in his own ranks before pointing the finger at others.”</p> <p>One of the most secretive organisations in Russia, the Wagner Group doesn’t officially exist. However, reports suggest hundreds of its members are fighting in Ukraine with claims shortly after the invasion that its mercenaries were operating in Kyiv with orders from the Kremlin to assassinate the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy.</p> <p>It is also understood that efforts are being made by private messaging groups in Russia to recruit a new brigade of mercenaries to fight in Ukraine. Recently, the Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, announced that 16,000 fighters from the Middle East had volunteered to fight with the Russian army.</p> <p>One account on VK is dedicated to the Rusich “sabotage and assault reconnaissance group” which appears to be operating in Ukraine, according to a post on 17 March. The Rusich logo features a Slavic Swastika known as a Kolovrat.</p> <p>Another recent VK posting lists Rusich as part of a coalition of separatist groups and militias including the extreme far-right group, Russian National Unity.</p>

One image shared on VK by a Rusich-affiliated account shows fighters, seemingly in Ukraine although it has proved impossible to verify, holding a Valknut flag, a symbol also commonly appropriated by white supremacists.

It has been reported that mercenary units recruited to Wagner are being given names like “The Hawks”, possibly to steer away from the group’s reputation after repeated accusations of human rights abuses in its operations in Syria and Libya.

The Tech Against Terrorism analysis found a prominent Wagner Group-affiliated Telegram channel sharing an image in May 2021 of the Kolovrat allegedly daubed on a cliff in Palmyra, Syria.

It also found Telegram channels – named “Wagner PMC” in Russian – sharing footage and memes as recently as 4 March relating to the torture and beheading of a Syrian captive by Wagner mercenaries in 2017.

The Wagner group was first identified in 2014, when backing pro-Russian separatists in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. It is owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, one of Putin’s closest allies, and has since conducted covert operations across Africa and the Middle East.

Military experts believe that mercenaries allow the Kremlin – which has always denied any links with mercenary groups – to keep its death toll down.

In an effort to control its narrative, Russia recently opened a criminal case against Facebook’s owner, Meta, accusing it of being an extremist organisation.

The move by Russian prosecutors came after the the US tech giant temporarily allowed the use of terms such as “death to the Russian invaders”.

Hadley added: “We condemn Russia for weaponising terrorism in this way and subverting international counter-terrorism norms.”

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HEADLINE	03/20 Shanghai Disney closes amid Covid surge
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/shanghai-disney-resort-to-close-monday-amid-covid-19-surge-in-china-11647805418?mod=hp_listb_pos2
GIST	<p>The Shanghai Disney Resort has announced that it will close on Monday until further notice, citing China’s recent wave of Covid-19 infections.</p> <p>The resort said on its website that it would consult local authorities and notify guests as soon as it had a confirmed date to resume operations.</p> <p>China reported 1,656 new locally transmitted Covid-19 cases on Saturday, health authorities said, compared with about 70 cases at the beginning of the month. Meanwhile, mainland China reported its first deaths from Covid-19 in more than a year on Saturday as the country battles a surge of Omicron infections.</p> <p>Two patients died of Covid-19 in the northeastern province of Jilin, which has been hard hit by the Omicron wave, China’s National Health Commission said. The deaths, both of which occurred March 18, are the nation’s first recorded fatalities since Jan. 26, 2021.</p> <p>Earlier in the week, Chinese health authorities barred Jilin’s 24 million residents from leaving the province, the first time such restrictions have been imposed on an entire province since Hubei province, home to the city of Wuhan, was locked down at the start of the pandemic.</p>

	<p>China—the world’s most populous country—has reported fewer than 5,000 deaths from the coronavirus since the pandemic began in 2020. It has kept infections and death counts low through costly and laborious measures including tight border controls, targeted lockdowns, mass testing and digital surveillance.</p> <p>Walt Disney Co., which is a minority owner in the Chinese resort, said that its theme parks and resorts generated record income in its fiscal first quarter, signaling that the worst of the damage the company suffered from the coronavirus pandemic may be behind it.</p> <p>Shanghai Disneyland, which first opened in 2016, was the first Disney park to close as the coronavirus pandemic spread throughout China in early 2020. Disney later closed all of its parks, costing the company billions of dollars in revenue. Shanghai Disneyland reopened in May 2020.</p> <p>In late October, Shanghai Disneyland locked more than 30,000 visitors inside its theme park and forced them to take Covid-19 tests after one customer came back positive for the virus—an example of the zero tolerance policy imposed by the Chinese government.</p> <p>China is attempting to move on from its so-called Covid-Zero lockdown measures in favor of a more precise approach to containing the virus that is less damaging to its economy. The updated measures, which include more efficient testing and shorter and more targeted quarantines, are being put to the test by the latest Omicron wave.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Gulf Coast states tornado threats this week
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/gulf-coast-states-including-texas-louisiana-face-tornado-threats-this-week-11647804414?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	<p>The National Weather Service said there is a substantial risk of severe weather including tornadoes, thunderstorms, hail and damaging winds this week as a storm moves east along the Gulf Coast.</p> <p>The storms are predicted to begin Monday afternoon in Eastern Texas and could include damaging wind gusts, authorities said Sunday. The Weather Service issued a warning of enhanced risk for severe thunderstorms from the Texas Hill Country to the Upper Texas Coast, which spans major cities like Houston, Pasadena and Austin.</p> <p>By Tuesday, the greatest risk is predicted for Louisiana, Mississippi and eastern Alabama. The Weather Service’s Storm Prediction Center said there is moderate risk of severe thunderstorms on Tuesday from southern Louisiana to southern Mississippi. Strong tornadoes, damaging winds and hail are most likely Tuesday evening and overnight. The Weather Service warned of flash flooding that could affect the Southern Plains, which includes central and northern Texas, and the Lower Mississippi Valley.</p> <p>Nearly two million people are at moderate risk for severe weather Tuesday, according to the Storm Prediction Center, including residents of Baton Rouge, La., and Jackson, Miss.</p> <p>By Wednesday, the storm system will diminish and “likely spread across southern Alabama and into the Florida Panhandle,” the Weather Service reported. The potentially dangerous weather should move offshore by Thursday.</p> <p>Southwest Texas, meanwhile, is at high risk of fires Monday due to strong winds and low humidity, just days after wildfires in the region killed one person and resulted in evacuation orders for hundreds of homes, according to the Weather Service. On Friday, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 11 counties.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Ukraine forces try to hold Mariupol
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SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukrainian-forces-try-to-hold-mariupol-as-combat-reaches-city-streets-11647690670?cx_testId=3&cx_testVariant=cx_2&cx_artPos=0&mod=WTRN#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine—Fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces has reached the streets of the port city of Mariupol, officials said Saturday, a strategic objective for Moscow as it attempts to open an overland corridor to the annexed region of Crimea and shift the momentum in its three-week-old invasion.</p> <p>During weekslong bombardment and attack, Ukrainians said they had kept Russian forces at bay on Mariupol’s outskirts, but that has changed. “The fighting is already in the city itself,” an official from the mayor’s office said via text message. “But Mariupol remains a Ukrainian city.”</p> <p>Government forces in Ukraine said they kept up the resistance Saturday. “Fierce battles between the defenders of Mariupol and the occupier continue, including on the city streets,” said a report on the Telegram channel of the volunteer group Azov Battalion, whose members have been fighting alongside regular government forces inside the city.</p> <p>“The military is repulsing the enemy, which isn’t stopping its attack on Mariupol with artillery and aircraft,” the report said.</p> <p>The capture of Mariupol would be a victory for Russia, which has so far failed to take any big Ukrainian cities since the start of its invasion. A bustling southern port with a major metals plant, Mariupol straddles an east-west thoroughfare coveted by the Kremlin as a possible link between Russia’s mainland and Crimea, which it seized from Ukraine in 2014. Since then, the peninsula has been blockaded by Ukraine, and its main link to Russia is a 12-mile-long bridge hastily started by Russia in 2014 and completed four years later.</p> <p>“This would potentially strengthen Russian forces’ ability to resupply, to operate from a more secure base, and to project forces farther into Ukraine,” said Barry Pavel, a former Pentagon and National Security Council official now at the Atlantic Council think tank.</p> <p>Russia anticipated a speedy capture of Mariupol, a traditionally Russian-speaking city, which would have freed up its forces to encircle Ukrainian army units in eastern regions and allowed others to push farther toward the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. But the city has been a hard target, and its defenders have endured weeks of shelling and siege.</p> <p>Russian military leaders have been desperate for a symbolic victory to offer President Vladimir Putin, analysts say, and U.S. officials have detected indications of tension in the Russian intelligence and defense apparatuses over the lack of military progress.</p> <p>“The commanders on the Russian side have to be desperate for a ‘win’—they want to show Putin results,” said Emily Harding, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst and Senate Intelligence Committee staff member now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington. “Conquering Mariupol would give them something to show for the heavy losses they’ve taken.”</p> <p>In the southern city of Mykolaiv, Russian missile strikes hit the headquarters of the Ukrainian army’s 79th brigade, including the quarters where officers’ families live. Several buildings collapsed, and footage from the scene, broadcast on Ukrainian television channels, showed a small child being dug out from the rubble. Ukrainian officials say 40 people, and possibly more, have been killed.</p> <p>Vitaliy Kim, the governor of Mykolaiv, said in a video recording that the “cowardly” Russian strike targeted sleeping soldiers and that rescue operations at the site are under way. The Ukrainian military counteroffensive in the region is pressing ahead, he added.</p> <p>As Russian forces have pounded Mariupol with airstrikes and artillery, the city has emerged as a symbol of tough Ukrainian resistance, as well as civilian suffering. Thousands of the city’s 400,000 population have fled, and thousands have been killed, some dumped into mass graves, officials said.</p>

On Saturday, some of the fighting focused around the Azovstal steel plant, inside the western border of the city. The company said the plant was shelled by Russian artillery Saturday, forcing a shutdown in operations.

Kyiv has tried to relieve Mariupol, so far unsuccessfully. Oleksiy Arestovych, an adviser to Ukraine's president, said there was no way for Ukrainian forces to break Russia's siege, addressing criticism the government isn't doing enough.

Mariupol's proximity to the Russian border means Moscow could easily bring significant air power to bear on it from nearby military hubs, such as Crimea and the southern Russian city of Rostov, he said.

The closest Ukrainian units to Mariupol are more than 100 kilometers, or 62 miles, away, he said, and the vast treeless steppe around the city provides no cover from Russian attacks.

"No army in the world—even the U. S.—would make it that distance with the forces that we currently have there, unfortunately," Mr. Arestovych said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his overnight address that 9,000 people have been evacuated from the city. Rescuers in Mariupol pulled 130 people from the wreckage of a theater hit by an airstrike this week and searched for more survivors.

About 1,300 people remained trapped Friday in the basement of the theater, where residents had sought shelter from Russian shelling, said Lyudmyla Denisova, Ukraine's human-rights commissioner, adding that it was difficult to be certain of the number of survivors. She didn't confirm any casualties.

Parts of the Russian offensive have been bogged down by poor planning and logistics, and forces have encountered fierce Ukrainian counterattacks. Some of Russia's ground advances stalled this week in the midst of mounting casualties. Four Russian generals have died, the Ukrainian government said. Some U.S. government calculations estimate that as many as 7,000 Russian troops have been killed in action, though officials caution that those are uncertain estimates.

"They continue to make incremental gains," U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Saturday in Bulgaria of Russian forces' progress in southern Ukraine.

Yet Moscow has been showcasing some of its high-tech weaponry with long-distance missile strikes. The Russian Defense Ministry said Saturday that it fired an air-launched ballistic missile on Ukraine in what might have been the first use of the system Mr. Putin announced several years ago.

The weapon struck a large underground warehouse of missiles and aviation ammunition near Deliatyn in western Ukraine, the ministry said. The Russian state news agency RIA Novosti said it was the first use of the new weapon.

Western and Ukrainian military experts cast doubt on whether Russia in fact used such a sophisticated weapon. Yuriy Ignat, spokesman for the Air Force of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Ukraine's military, confirmed a strike on the facility but said there was no information yet on the number of casualties or the type of weapon used.

"Unfortunately, Ukraine has become a testing ground for Russia's entire arsenal of missiles," said Mr. Ignat. "They use missiles that fly 2,000 kilometers, 5,500 kilometers."

Mr. Zelensky said Russian forces "continue to block the supply of humanitarian aid to the besieged cities in most areas," aside from the seven open humanitarian corridors. He added that more than 180,000 Ukrainians have been rescued and tons of essential supplies have been delivered. He also dropped all taxes and customs duties in an effort to expedite cargo entering the nation.

	Mr. Zelensky called on Russia to negotiate and said that in the coming days he would address other nations such as Switzerland, Israel, Italy and Japan, just as he addressed the U.S., Canada and Germany. “It’s time to meet. Time to talk. It is time to restore territorial integrity and justice for Ukraine,” he said. “Otherwise, Russia’s losses will be so huge that several generations won’t be enough to rebound...Ukraine’s proposals are on the table.”
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HEADLINE	03/18 Canada oil sands: buried treasures
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/canadian-oil-sands-buried-treasures-11647601381?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos5
GIST	<p>Dirty, expensive to extract and trapped by a lack of pipelines, Canadian oil sands can be a tough investment proposition. Yet a year of elevated oil prices has turned companies mining them into cash machines.</p> <p>Soaring energy prices are set to reward almost everyone producing hydrocarbons: Major oil companies and U.S. shale producers reported record free cash flows in 2021 and should do even better this year. Analysts polled by FactSet predict that a subindex of U.S. oil and gas exploration companies in the S&P 500 will beat last year’s bounty by an impressive 35%. Impressive, that is, until compared with Canadian oil sands producers: Suncor Energy, SU -0.16% Canadian Natural Resources, CNQ -0.93% Imperial Oil and Cenovus are set to increase their free cash flow by 60.5% this year, on average.</p> <p>There are two factors driving this dynamic: First, oil sands require hefty investment upfront but output holds steady for decades with relatively modest maintenance capital expenditures. The opposite is true for shale deposits, which take less upfront spending but, due to quick decline rates, require continuous investment into drilling and well completion to keep oil flowing. Capital expenditures have stayed relatively consistent for Canadian oil producers over the years—through boom and bust cycles—compared with U.S. producers, whose spending has fluctuated wildly. Thomas Liles, analyst at Rystad Energy, notes that, given the maturity of the oil sands sector, reinvestment rates, or the percentage of cash from operations spent on capital expenditures, should be in the 20%-30% range this year and next. That frees up a lot of cash for dividends and repurchases. Suncor, for example, doubled its dividend and bought back 6% of its shares in 2021.</p> <p>Second, the task of separating extremely heavy crude oil from sand is energy intensive and leads to higher operating costs. That is generally a disadvantage, but it creates more operating leverage: Each dollar increase in oil prices generates a higher boost in profits. Suncor’s cash operating costs for its oil sands operations were roughly \$20 a barrel last year; for U.S. shale producer EOG, that cost was closer to \$10 a barrel.</p> <p>One offset to higher oil prices are Canadian royalty structures. Matt Murphy, analyst at Tudor, Pickering, Holt & Co., notes that the Canadian oil companies must pay royalties to the Alberta province on a sliding scale, which can range anywhere from 25% of net revenues when oil prices are 60 Canadian dollars a barrel or cheaper, equivalent to \$47.50, to 40% when oil prices reach C\$120 a barrel. U.S. royalty rates tend to be fixed as a percentage of revenue.</p> <p>Royalty payments notwithstanding, Suncor, Canada’s largest oil sands producer, is expected to increase its free cash flow by more than 60% this year on just a 7.6% increase in capital expenditures, according to estimates polled by FactSet. EOG Resources, one of the largest independent U.S. exploration and production companies, is set to increase free cash flow by 21% but it will take 16% more in capital expenditures to get there. That isn’t completely priced in—oil sands producers’ free cash flow yield is higher than U.S. producers.</p> <p>Longer term, the bull case for carbon-heavy Canadian oil is shakier and will depend in part on a shift to a more nuanced view of environmental, social and governance concerns. Oil sands’ carbon footprint is high, but Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has brought social concerns to the forefront—Western oil majors almost immediately pulled out of Russia—as well as the perils of relying on autocratic regimes for vital commodities.</p>

	Energy investors today are laser-focused on two things these days: Immediate cash returns and ESG alignment. At the moment, Canadian oil companies are ticking the first box. A paradigm shift in ESG could really supercharge their shares.
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HEADLINE	03/20 Canada rail work stoppage stalls shipments
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/canadian-pacific-railway-locks-out-conductors-and-engineers-11647753092?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>Canadian Pacific Railway Ltd. trains were halted Sunday morning, stalling global shipments of key manufactured goods and commodities such as fertilizers, after an impasse in contract negotiations between the company and its conductors and engineers.</p> <p>The Teamsters Canada Rail Conference, which represents more than 3,000 conductors, engineers and yard workers at Canadian Pacific, issued a statement near midnight Sunday Eastern time stating that the railway initiated the lockout after the union failed to meet the company's deadline for approving a new contract.</p> <p>Patrick Waldron, a spokesman for Canadian Pacific, said the union misrepresented the cause of the work stoppage. The railway's representatives were still at the negotiating table with a federally appointed mediator in Calgary, Alberta, waiting for a response to a new contract offer when the union issued its statement that the railway had initiated a lockdown.</p> <p>"The actions of the teamsters' leadership last night were dishonest and irresponsible. The union falsely claimed that Canadian Pacific initiated a lockout. In fact it was the union that initiated the work stoppage," Mr. Waldron said.</p> <p>Canadian Pacific continues to want to bargain in good faith with the union, he said. "The union's actions show a complete disregard for the unnecessary damage this will cause to the supply chain," Mr. Waldron said.</p> <p>The union didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>The railway has been in negotiations and mediation since September with the union, which seeks increased wage and pension benefits and more rest times. The situation marks the fourth time since 2011 that the contract negotiations with the Teamsters triggered work stoppages at Canadian Pacific.</p> <p>The prospect of a strike prompted a number of businesses, customers and politicians to publicly urge the Canadian government to introduce back-to-work legislation that would force striking workers to return to their jobs. Such a law would require a vote of Canada's parliament, which is set to convene Monday after a break.</p> <p>Canada's labor minister, Seamus O'Regan, traveled to Calgary, Alberta, where contract negotiations are taking place. He had urged both sides to avoid a work stoppage that would exacerbate existing supply-chain bottlenecks and rising commodity prices. Halting Canadian Pacific's trains "could not have come at a worse time," he said in a video statement posted on Twitter.</p> <p>Canadian Pacific is the sixth-largest freight railway in North America, shipping goods across Canada and south to central U.S. states. It is the primary shipper of fertilizers such as Canadian potash, which is mined in the province of Saskatchewan.</p> <p>Nutrien Ltd. is the world's largest corporate potash producer and most production from its Saskatchewan mines is transported by Canadian Pacific to ships destined for foreign nations. Nutrien said this week that it plans to increase its annual production of potash this year by about 7%, or nearly 1 million metric tons, after potash shipments from Russia and Belarus, major producers, were effectively halted in the wake of the Ukraine war.</p>

	<p>Nutrien Chief Executive Ken Seitz said that if the rail strike extends for more than a few weeks, the company will start reducing production at its potash mines because its warehouses are currently full of the fertilizer for planting season.</p> <p>“It’s a frustrating situation given what is going on in the world, and we would expect some legislation,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 US stocks extend yearslong winning streak
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-stocks-extend-yearslong-winning-streak-11647744448?mod=hp_lead_pos1
GIST	<p>Investors are piling back into U.S. stocks, betting that the domestic equity market can withstand new economic headwinds better than other parts of the world.</p> <p>They are shying away from European markets because of the war in Ukraine and the continent’s dependence on Russian energy, and looking askance at China, where Covid-19 lockdowns recently halted production at electronics and auto factories.</p> <p>The U.S., by contrast, is less reliant on Russian oil, while counts of Covid-19 patients admitted to hospitals have fallen substantially. And many investors believe the U.S. economy entered the geopolitical tumult of recent weeks in strong enough shape to withstand the jump in oil prices and heightened anxiety sparked by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>The S&P 500 rose 6.2% last week, its best performance since November 2020, after the Federal Reserve raised interest rates for the first time since 2018. The index is now up 5.6% since Russia invaded Ukraine and has trimmed its losses for the year to 6.4%.</p> <p>The recent rally extends years of U.S. outperformance. Since the start of 2010, the S&P 500 has quadrupled, while an MSCI index tracking stocks outside the U.S. is up about 30% over that time.</p> <p>More recently, Germany’s DAX index is down 1.5% since the Russian invasion on Feb. 24. The Shanghai Composite has declined 6.8% and Hong Kong’s Hang Seng has tumbled 9.5% over the same period.</p> <p>“The U.S. is a safe haven in an increasingly unsafe world,” said Jim McDonald, chief investment strategist at Northern Trust, which was managing \$1.6 trillion at the end of 2021.</p> <p>This week investors will look to a speech Monday by Fed Chairman Jerome Powell for further clues about the economic outlook. They also will parse earnings reports from Nike Inc., General Mills Inc. and Darden Restaurants Inc. to gauge the strength of the U.S. consumer.</p> <p>The U.S.’s production of energy and agricultural products helps insulate it from the recent increases in commodities prices, while a strong U.S. labor market should support the domestic economy, Mr. McDonald said. Northern Trust has been buying U.S. stocks over the past month and selling shares from other parts of the world, he said.</p> <p>The Chicago-based firm isn’t alone. Money managers in recent weeks have shifted their appetites for regional equities, loading up on U.S. stocks and dropping shares of European companies. The net percentage of respondents to BofA Global Research’s global fund manager survey who said they were overweight U.S. equities jumped 27 percentage points from February to March, returning the country’s stocks to a net overweight position in the poll.</p> <p>More recently, Germany’s DAX index is down 1.5% since the Russian invasion on Feb. 24. The Shanghai Composite has declined 6.8% and Hong Kong’s Hang Seng has tumbled 9.5% over the same period.</p>

“The U.S. is a safe haven in an increasingly unsafe world,” said Jim McDonald, chief investment strategist at Northern Trust, which was managing \$1.6 trillion at the end of 2021.

This week investors will look to a speech Monday by Fed Chairman Jerome Powell for further clues about the economic outlook. They also will parse earnings reports from [Nike Inc.](#) , [General Mills Inc.](#) and [Darden Restaurants Inc.](#) to gauge the strength of the U.S. consumer.

The U.S.’s production of energy and [agricultural products](#) helps insulate it from the recent increases in commodities prices, while [a strong U.S. labor market](#) should support the domestic economy, Mr. McDonald said. Northern Trust has been buying U.S. stocks over the past month and selling shares from other parts of the world, he said.

The Chicago-based firm isn’t alone. Money managers in recent weeks have shifted their appetites for regional equities, loading up on U.S. stocks and dropping shares of European companies. The net percentage of respondents to BofA Global Research’s global fund manager survey who said they were overweight U.S. equities jumped 27 percentage points from February to March, returning the country’s stocks to a net overweight position in the poll.

Overseas, it was a different story: The share of survey respondents who were overweight eurozone stocks dropped 48 percentage points to the largest underweight reading for that region since July 2012. Preferences for stocks in emerging markets, Japan and the U.K. also declined.

The conflict in Ukraine is expected to stress European economies as it strains supply chains and raises the cost of energy and commodities for households and manufacturers. Europe’s economic recovery was less robust than that of the U.S. even before the invasion by Russia of Ukraine.

Atlanta-based wealth-management firm Homrich Berg is considering lowering its allocation to international equities and moving to short-term bonds because of the risk of economic slowdown outside the U.S., said chief investment officer Stephanie Lang.

“We’re not seeing the recession risk in the U.S.,” she said. “We are starting to see heightened recession risk globally. There’s a bifurcation.”

To be sure, some investors say that even with elevated geopolitical instability, stocks overseas trade at a steep enough discount to U.S. shares to merit consideration. The S&P 500 traded last week at 19.2 times its projected earnings over the next 12 months, according to FactSet. Germany’s DAX had a forward multiple of 12.7, while the Hang Seng traded at 10.1 times projected earnings.

“I think most of the risks are actually priced into the international markets at this point,” said Ben Kirby, co-head of investments at Thornburg Investment Management.

Thornburg in recent weeks added to its positions in Dutch insurer NN Group N.V. and French oil-and-gas company TotalEnergies SE, he said.

U.S. equity funds saw their largest inflows in five weeks in the week ended Wednesday, while emerging markets equities had their first outflows since December and European equities recorded a fifth consecutive week of outflows, according to a BofA Global Research analysis of EPFR Global data.

The U.S. makes up about 60% of the MSCI ACWI All Cap Index, one measure of the global equity market.

Trading has been volatile in the U.S. as well as overseas. Both the S&P 500 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average suffered their first corrections—a decline of at least 10% from a recent high—in two years in recent weeks. The Nasdaq Composite entered a bear market, down 20% or more.

	<p>Many investors, though, appear to be using those pullbacks as opportunities to buy. BofA Securities reported that clients have been buying the dip and recently favored stocks in the consumer discretionary and consumer staples segments.</p> <p>The best-performing sectors of the S&P 500 over the past month are energy stocks, which benefit from higher oil prices, and utilities and healthcare shares, which investors often turn to when they are feeling cautious about the economic outlook.</p> <p>Chevron Corp. shares have rallied 21% over the past month, while shares of drugmaker Eli Lilly & Co. have risen 20% and shares of utility NextEra Energy Inc. have gained 11%. Other strong performers are supermarket company Kroger Co. , which has advanced 22% and freight bellwether J.B. Hunt Transport Services Inc. , which has climbed 14%.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Ukraine war toll on global food supplies
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-war-farming-food-supplies-grain-russia-11647796055
GIST	<p>Ukrainian farmer Igor Borisov has 2,000 metric tons of corn from the fall harvest stuck in a warehouse behind Russian battle lines. Like other farmers across Ukraine, his crop for this year is also imperiled.</p> <p>Global concerns that Russia's invasion would curtail Ukraine's 2022 harvest have come to fruition. The crop shortfall will extend to the many countries that rely on Ukraine for wheat, corn and cooking oil.</p> <p>With wheat already in the ground, and only a few weeks left to plant corn, farmers in Ukraine can't get needed fertilizers and chemicals. They are low on fuel for tractors and other farm equipment. Workers are quitting to join the fight or to leave the country, leaving farms short-handed.</p> <p>Mr. Borisov said he and other farmers need to start their corn, sunflower and barley crops in April and May. That is now in doubt, and the impact on food supplies and prices will be felt world-wide.</p> <p>"We hope we will plant, and we want to plant, but the situation is totally unpredictable," Mr. Borisov said. "You cannot build a forecast on Vladimir Putin. "</p> <p>Ukraine's nutrient-rich soils yield 10% of global wheat exports, 14% of corn exports and about half of the world's sunflower oil, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In just three weeks, war disrupted Ukraine agriculture, triggering higher prices as well as the threat of global shortages. Much of the exports go to developing economies already struggling with food-cost inflation.</p> <p>Mr. Borisov's farm is close to the border with Russia, in an area that was overrun on the first day of fighting. He had been away when the Russians invaded. His parents, who live close to his farm, called him to say hundreds of tanks were moving past the fields.</p> <p>Russia's naval blockade and fighting around Ukraine ports has all but stopped maritime shipping and left limited means for transporting goods. Wheat prices have hit record levels over the effect on Ukrainian and Russian shipments.</p> <p>Like Ukraine's military efforts, the country's agriculture sector is rallying. Exports are being rerouted, and Ukraine is asking the U.S., Poland, France and others for supplies, said Taras Vysotskyi, Ukraine's deputy minister of agrarian policy and food. In the best case scenario, the country's agricultural exports will fall by a fifth this year compared with 2021, he said, but a much bigger drop is more likely.</p> <p>Should Russian forces leave immediately, Dmitry Skorniakov said, his four farms would still struggle to resume work. Tractors, chemical sprayers and a grain silo were destroyed on one farm located close to the besieged city of Mariupol, he said. Some of his workers have left to join the country's defense.</p>

Further along the Black Sea coast, Larissa Boden's asparagus farm, Ukraine's largest, is in territory now held by Russia. Neighboring farms in what is one of Ukraine's most important growing regions have had fields chewed up by tanks and artillery fire, she said.

Ms. Boden planned to take delivery of 340,000 asparagus crowns from the Netherlands to plant more crops by April. She made a down payment of €78,000, about \$85,500. After the invasion, she canceled the order and asked the supplier to try to sell them elsewhere.

Like Mr. Skorniakov, she fears she won't have enough workers. "We don't have people," Ms. Boden said, "we have tanks."

The government of Ukraine, whose flag is said to depict a blue sky over a yellow field, has made farmworkers largely exempt from conscripted military service. Many are joining anyway.

Even on Mr. Skorniakov's farm near the comparatively peaceful border with Poland, his remaining farm hands are able to do less than 60% of the work, he said. Fertilizers and chemicals haven't been delivered, Mr. Skorniakov said. Fuel he typically buys from Russia and Belarus is unattainable.

"It's a disaster," he said.

On track

Ukraine is the world's fourth and fifth largest exporter of corn and wheat, respectively, according to the USDA, and 85% of its crop exports travel by sea, said Mr. Vysotskyi, the government minister.

With ports closed, the country is trying to shift some exports through its Western borders. Around 25% to 30% are now heading to Romania, Poland and Slovakia by train and on to other ports, Mr. Vysotskyi said.

It is an imperfect solution. Ukraine's railways don't accommodate as high a volume of crops as ports can, and grains must be transferred to different train cars at the border because Ukraine's Soviet-era railways use a different gauge than those in the European Union. The shipping detours will add 10% to 15% to the cost of crops, Mr. Vysotskyi said.

The war in Ukraine is inflating global food prices that are already at decade highs, largely from the pandemic's lingering supply-chain troubles. Wheat futures are up 42% so far this year; the price of corn has risen 27%.

Worsening food supply prospects, Russia, also a major grain exporter, is struggling to get its crops out of the Black Sea. JPMorgan Chase & Co. estimated a decline of 60% in Russian grain shipments in the second week of March compared with the typical volume for that period in past years.

Grain is used for animal feed, and the supply interruptions have already hit the meat industry. "We are seeing massive increases in the price of milk and meat, and this is not short-term," said Chris Elliott, a professor and expert on international food supply chains at Queens University, Belfast.

New bounty

Over the past two decades, the world's wheat trade has almost doubled, in large part because of stepped-up exports from Ukraine and Russia, according to the Agricultural Market Information System, a Group of 20 global food policy initiative. As recently as 15 years ago, Ukraine's grain exports were less than 7% of the country's 2020 total, according to government statistics.

An estimated 25 countries source at least half of their supplies from the two countries, according to AMIS. "It is obviously disconcerting that some countries rely so strongly on Russia and or Ukraine for their wheat supplies," said Denis Drechsler, a project manager for the group.

Return to Top	<p>Today, more than 41 million hectares of agricultural land cover 70% of Ukraine. Agriculture is the largest part of the Ukrainian economy, accounting for 14% of gross domestic product in the third quarter of last year.</p> <p>It wasn't always that way. When Kees Huizinga arrived in Ukraine 20 years ago, straight from Dutch agriculture college, he saw potential in the country's many abandoned fields.</p> <p>Mr. Huizinga farms wheat, barley and sugar beet, and raises livestock in central Ukraine. Three weeks ago, he paid the equivalent of 80 cents for a liter of gas. Now, it is \$1.65, he said, "If you can even get your hands on it."</p> <p>Mr. Huizinga said he needs to plant his corn within three weeks. His farm has enough fuel for maybe three-quarters of a regular crop. The shortage of chemicals and fertilizers also will diminish crop yields, he said.</p> <p>Farmers reported having, on average, only 20% of the fuel they needed, according to an online government poll of 1,700 farmers, who represented 15% of Ukraine's arable land.</p> <p>At around 5 a.m. on Feb. 24, the first day of the Russian invasion, Mr. Huizinga said he heard what sounded like a jet fighter flying high above his farm. Then he felt the windows and doors shudder. A Russian missile struck an ammunition dump.</p> <p>"Soon, what is a disaster for farmers here will become one for elsewhere in the world," Mr. Huizinga said, "when they can't get our food."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Flashpoint: Pentagon Ukraine bio-lab work
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/pentagons-work-with-ukraines-biological-facilities-becomes-flashpoint-in-russias-information-war-11647768601
GIST	<p>On his first official visit abroad, the new senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, was taken to a facility in Ukraine where the U.S. helped scientists working with dangerous biological materials. But rather than produce biological weapons, U.S. officials in that ramshackle building were trying to prevent lethal pathogens from falling into the hands of terrorists.</p> <p>"I removed a tray of glass vials containing Bacillus anthracis, which is the bacterium that causes the anthrax," recalls Andrew Weber, the Pentagon official who was in charge of the U.S.-funded program that worked with the Ukrainian government. Mr. Weber said he showed the tray "to a very concerned-looking young senator."</p> <p>Mr. Obama himself recalled seeing in his 2005 trip to Ukraine "test tubes filled with anthrax and the plague lying virtually unlocked and unguarded."</p> <p>A decades-old Pentagon program that was used to secure biological weapons across the former Soviet Union—and to build trust between Washington and Moscow after the Cold War—has instead become a new flashpoint in an information war between the two countries in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Moscow has accused the Pentagon of funding weapons work in Ukraine's biological laboratories. "These were not peaceful experiments," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said earlier this month.</p> <p>China, whose leader Xi Jinping has cultivated a close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, has echoed those allegations. "Russia has found during its military operations that the U.S. uses these facilities to conduct bio-military plans," the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman told reporters.</p>

U.S. officials have flatly denied those claims and warned that Moscow could use its allegations to justify its own use of weapons of mass destruction in Ukraine.

“We believe that Moscow may be setting the stage to use a chemical weapon and then falsely blame Ukraine to justify escalating its attacks on the Ukrainian people,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said last week. “Manufacturing events and creating false narratives of genocide to justify greater use of military force is a tactic that Russia has used before.”

The allegations have shocked those who are most familiar with the Pentagon’s post-Cold War initiative, called the Cooperative Threat Reduction program. That is because not only has Russia been aware of the Pentagon’s work securing chemical, biological and nuclear facilities across the former Soviet Union, but it had also been its beneficiary for many years.

“They’re outrageous claims,” said Robert Pope, the head of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, or DTRA, the arm of the Pentagon in charge of running the program. “We were created 30 years ago to eliminate weapons of mass destruction, and Russia knows well we eliminate weapons of mass destruction.”

The program, which dates back to 1991 and continues today, stretches across the former Soviet Union. Since the program started, the Pentagon has spent approximately \$12 billion on securing material used in weapons of mass destruction in post-Soviet republics, according to a DTRA spokeswoman. Of those funds, about \$200 million has been spent on the biological work in Ukraine since 2005. The funds have supported dozens of labs, health facilities and diagnostic sites around the country, the DTRA spokeswoman said.

Mr. Weber, who was in charge of negotiating the initial agreement with Kyiv to work on securing the country’s biological materials and facilities, said that work expanded to Ukraine after the 9/11 attacks, when al Qaeda terrorists hijacked aircraft and crashed them into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. U.S. policy makers grew worried about the potential for terrorists to steal biological materials—fears that were heightened after letters containing anthrax were sent in the U.S. mail to congressional offices and media outlets. The FBI eventually concluded that an American scientist employed at a military lab sent the letters.

The president of Ukraine at the time, Leonid Kuchma, concerned about the threat of terrorism in his own country, asked the U.S. for help. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade earlier, Ukraine had been starved of the funds needed to secure its biological facilities.

Mr. Weber put together a team that visited Ukraine’s biological and chemical facilities, which ranged from large laboratories to small veterinary research centers. “We found that a number of them had dangerous pathogen collections left over from Soviet days,” he said. “They were in pretty bad shape.”

Ukraine’s laboratories—unlike some in other former Soviet republics—weren’t directly involved in the Cold War biological-weapons program, but they did have pathogens that fed into offensive work, according to Mr. Weber.

Those pathogens, like anthrax, could pose a threat if released, whether accidentally or on purpose. The focus of U.S. work in Ukraine was to consolidate that biological material, much of it related to agriculture, into secure facilities, which the U.S. would pay to build or upgrade.

Paul McNelly, who from 1995 to 2003 directed the Defense Department’s chemical and biological elimination programs in Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, said he was stunned with what he saw inside the former Soviet facilities.

“You would walk into these places and the refrigerators that stored these dangerous pathogens, they had no locks on them at all,” Mr. McNelly said. “There would be vials that were labeled tularemia, plague,

different things like that. And these people, most of them, weren't masked. Their gowns were antiquated." He added: "It was horrible."

As part of the program, the Pentagon spent \$1 billion to build the Russians a facility in Shchuchye, Siberia, to demilitarize some two million chemical weapons. By the time it was done in 2009, ties with Moscow were growing tense. The price of oil was going up, giving Russia more revenue to wean itself off foreign assistance. At the same time, Mr. Putin was consolidating power.

As a result, the Russian government became a less-willing partner to the Pentagon's drive to secure the deadly materials, according to James Tegnalia, who served as the head of DTRA from 2005 to 2009. "They wanted our money, but they didn't want to admit that we built the facility," Mr. Tegnalia said. "You could see that they were getting ready to pull back."

Russia's Foreign Ministry had in the past praised the program. But by 2012, Moscow declined to renew cooperation, saying it could pay for the work on its own.

In 2014, the year Moscow illegally annexed Crimea and began backing separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region, the program in Russia drew to a close.

A spokesman for the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C., didn't respond to a request for comment on the Pentagon program.

Yet even with that chapter of its cooperation over, the Russian claims about the Pentagon conducting secret weapons work in Ukraine came as a surprise not only to those who have worked on the program but also to other Western officials. The Kremlin has in the past used such charges as cover for its own actions, they say.

"We are concerned that Moscow could stage a false-flag operation, possibly including chemical weapons," North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said last week.

U.S. officials have declined to discuss what specific intelligence, if any, they have to indicate Russia might be preparing to deploy chemical or other unconventional weapons to Ukraine. But they say Russia has a history of using chemical weapons, including against Mr. Putin's domestic political opponents, and it [has encouraged their use in Syria](#) by President Bashar al-Assad's government.

The Russian government shot back against the U.S. allegations, denying plans to use chemical weapons. In a post last week on its official Telegram channel, the Russian Defense Ministry said the units fighting in Ukraine "do not have chemical munitions."

Mr. Tegnalia, the former DTRA director, views Russia's allegations as a path to an even more dangerous escalation. "If you see them using chemical weapons in Ukraine, watch out," he said, "because they're only one step away from nuclear weapons."

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HEADLINE	03/20 Russia economy fails even before sanctions
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-push-for-self-sufficient-economy-fails-before-western-sanctions-11647777600
GIST	<p>Russia spent years trying to wean itself off imported goods to fortify its economy against Western sanctions.</p> <p>Now, the impact of sanctions imposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made it clear that Moscow's efforts didn't work. Russia's continued dependence on imports means it is facing a painful economic readjustment.</p>

Parts of Russia's auto industry are shutting down for lack of foreign parts. The country's flagship homemade passenger jet gets its engine and other key parts from overseas suppliers. Foreign pet food and medication have disappeared from store shelves.

"Import substitution has failed to achieve its goal of making Russia less vulnerable to sanctions like these," said Janis Kluge, a specialist in the Russian economy at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. "The Russian ambitions were unrealistic to start with because a small economy like Russia's isn't able to produce complex and high-tech goods by itself. It's just simply not possible." Replacing the foreign products could take years, he added.

Import substitution is supposed to replace foreign goods with homemade ones. Though most economists believe that building everything domestically is costly and inefficient, the Kremlin embraced the strategy to combat sanctions that followed its takeover of Crimea in 2014. It was part of a multiyear plan to protect the economy, dubbed by observers as Fortress Russia.

But [Russia's dependence on imports](#) actually worsened over the years. In 2021, some 81% of manufacturers said they couldn't find any Russian versions of imported products they needed. More than half were dissatisfied with the quality of homegrown production. Both figures were the highest recorded since the survey by Russia's Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy began in 2015.

In 2020, imports accounted for 75% of sales of nonfood consumer goods in the Russian retail market, according to a study by the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. In some sectors the share was even higher, rising to 86% for telecommunications equipment, the study found. Imports equaled around a fifth of GDP in 2020, compared with 16% in China and higher than other big economies such as India and Brazil.

Russia's auto makers have been especially hard-hit by a lack of imported components such as computer chips. On Wednesday, the leader of Russia's Tatarstan region warned in televised remarks that truck maker Kamaz was facing a production drop of up to 40% and that some 15,000 of its employees could be idled until the company's supply-chain issues are resolved.

A Kamaz spokesman described the leader's comments as a worst-case scenario and said the company was shifting more of its production to truck lines made with Russian parts.

[Technology products](#) are among the most critical goods cut off by the sanctions, including semiconductors, computers, lasers and sensors. The ruble, meanwhile, has plummeted in value, raising the price of the goods Russia can still import.

Another high-risk area for Russia is its energy industry. Russia relies on Western technology for its aging oil and gas fields. Earlier sanctions forced Russian energy companies to delay or cancel projects while domestic technology has often proven inadequate, analysts say.

Until last month, Russia was highly integrated in the global economy. Untangling itself from international supply chains will be a slow and difficult process.

Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) has [acknowledged the hardships](#) ahead.

"Our economy will need deep structural changes in these new realities, and I won't hide this—they won't be easy," Mr. Putin said Wednesday.

Russian officials [say domestic companies will benefit](#) from the situation. "Previously it was unprofitable to produce certain goods inside the country whereas now this is becoming more interesting for businesses," central bank governor Elvira Nabiullina said Friday. Still, she acknowledged that this will come at a cost, including rising inflation.

Some imported products are deeply integrated in companies' operations. Up to 90% of Russian banks and companies use Western software, estimates Maria Shagina, visiting senior fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

"It was possible to replace low-tech items like pipes, things that don't require a lot of know-how and R&D investments," said Ms. Shagina. "But anything that is high-tech is still very much reliant on Western technology, Western software, Western know-how."

Even prestige projects that the Kremlin has touted as examples of the resurgence of Russian industry have proved to be stubbornly dependent on imports.

The Sukhoi Superjet 100, unveiled in 2007, was a bid to revive the country's flagging civilian aircraft-construction sector. But Russian officials have said around half the cost of parts used to build the Superjet comes from imported parts. French aerospace firm [Safran](#) SA—which produces the jet's engines, landing gear and engine covers—said it would stop all activities in Russia because of Western sanctions.

A planned version of the plane made almost entirely of domestic parts won't enter mass production until 2024, officials have said.

Sanctions have also hit consumers used to getting imported products. Svetlana Ryabova, a 36-year-old Moscow resident who helps run a rescue program for stray cats, said foreign pet food and medicine had become harder to find. Some brands such as Monge have disappeared from stores, and vaccines such as Nobivac and Purevax—both made by foreign pharmaceutical companies—are in short supply, she said.

Ms. Ryabova hopes domestic manufacturers will make up the shortfall. "We have them, of course, but people are in a panic and buying up everything," she said.

Russia launched the import-substitution drive by barring many Western food imports. French cheeses, Spanish ham and other delicacies appreciated by the country's wealthier urban elite disappeared from store shelves. The import substitution drive later expanded to other industries, including medicine and technology.

Between 2015 and 2020, authorities allocated over 2.9 trillion rubles, or \$27 billion, to the import substitution program, equivalent to 1.4% of budget expenditures over the period.

But the policy didn't boost the Russian economy, which was suffering a double blow from sanctions and low oil prices. Its gross domestic product growth has been slower than the world average since 2014 and Russians are poorer than before the Crimea annexation: by the end of 2020, real incomes had fallen by 9.3% from their 2013 level.

While Russia notched some successes, including the development of dairy and meat industries, the food ban pushed up prices, costing consumers 445 billion rubles, or \$4.1 billion, a year, according to a 2019 study published in the Russian Journal of the New Economic Association.

A [big wild card is China](#). Already a large Russian trading partner, Beijing could replace the U.S. and Europe as a supplier of many goods. But that could mean jeopardizing its already fraught trade relations with the West. China also doesn't produce some of the chips and other tech products Russia needs.

As the sanctions bite, Russian leaders have gone to great lengths to promote self-sufficiency, even praising the Soviet economy.

"The U.S.S.R. really lived under sanctions, developed and achieved tremendous success," Mr. Putin said earlier this month.

Others disagree. "The Russian economy will be much more primitive now," Mr. Kluge said.

HEADLINE	03/19 Mariupol: residents forcibly taken to Russia
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/03/19/Ukraine-Mariupol-residents-relocated-Russia/7751647735423/
GIST	<p>March 19 (UPI) -- Residents of Mariupol, Ukraine are being forcibly relocated to Russian territory against their will, according to a statement Saturday from the Mariupol City Council.</p> <p>"Over the past week, several thousand Mariupol residents have been taken to Russian territory. The occupiers illegally took people from the Livoberezhny district and from the shelter in the sports club building, where more than a thousand people (mostly women and children) were hiding from the constant bombing," the council said in a Ukrainian statement released via Telegram and later reported by CNN.</p> <p>Russian forces captured Mariupol residents and took them to camps where their phones and documents were checked, the statement continued. Some were then reportedly sent to Russian cities in remote areas. The whereabouts of others remain unknown.</p> <p>Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boichenko likened Russia's actions to those of Germany during World War II in comments to the news outlet Ukrinform.</p> <p>"What the occupiers are doing today is familiar to the older generation, who saw the horrific events of World War II, when the Nazis forcibly captured people. It is hard to imagine that in the 21st-century people can be forcibly taken to another country," Boichenko said.</p> <p>"Russian troops are not only destroying our peaceful Mariupol, they have gone even further and started driving away Mariupol residents. All war crimes by Russia must get the most severe punishment."</p> <p>Mariupol continued to bear an intense attack from Russian forces on Saturday, with invading soldiers advancing into the southeastern coastal city's port.</p> <p>Russian state-owned media reported Friday that separatists in Ukraine's eastern region were "tightening the noose" around Mariupol. More than 350,000 civilians have been stranded with little food or water, The Guardian reported.</p> <p>Residents fleeing the city described dead bodies in the streets, suffering endured by those who remain trapped and widespread looting.</p> <p>Corpses "were lying in the street, just covered in rags," Eduard Zarubin, a Mariupol doctor who escaped the city on Wednesday, told The New York Times. "No one cleaned up because there were no ambulances, or the ones that were still working had too much to do."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 NATO warns Russia on chemical weapons
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/03/20/ukraine-nato-boss-warns-russia-chemical-weapons-violate-international-law/7921647797224/
GIST	<p>March 20 (UPI) -- NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Sunday warned Russia that the use of chemical weapons in Ukraine would violate international law.</p> <p>"Any use of chemical weapons would be a blatant and brutal violation of international law, the ban on the use of chemical weapons," Stoltenberg told NBC's Meet the Press.</p> <p>"At the same time, we know that Russia has used chemical agents in Europe before, against their own political opponents and Russia has been facilitating and supporting the Assad regime in Syria, where chemical weapons has been used."</p>

Stoltenberg added that NATO must prevent the "very bloody, ugly, horrific conflict" from escalating into a full-fledged war between NATO and Russia which could potentially involve the United States directly.

His comments come after Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, [told CNN](#) that the United States would "respond aggressively" if Russia were to use chemical weapons in Ukraine.

"We are concerned that they may use chemical weapons in Ukraine," she said. "We have been clear, if they escalate to this level, we will respond aggressively to what they are doing."

Russian officials on Saturday tried to deflect from a possible chemical attack by claiming that Ukrainian "nationalists" would use such methods against Russian troops.

Mikhail Mizintsev, chief of Russia's National Defense Management Center, claimed without evidence [to Russian state media agency TASS](#) had placed mines in ammonia and chlorine storage facilities.

Russia has been known to plant false flags in apparent attempts to justify its own use of such tactics.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Sunday [told CBS](#) that Russian forces were "stalled" in Ukraine in with Putin "moving his forces into a woodchipper."

Russia's Ministry of Defense said Sunday that it had targeted ammunition and fuel depots in Ukraine with hypersonic missiles over the weekend, according to The New York Times. It would be the first time Russia had used such missiles if true, though whether the missiles were hypersonic has not been verified.

Austin said that the use of such missiles would not be a "game-changer" for Russia's outcome in the war.

"I think, again, the reason that he's resorting to using these types of weapons is because he's trying to reestablish some momentum," Austin said. "You kind of question why he would do this. Is he running low on precision-guided munitions?"

The Institute for the Study of War [said in a report Saturday](#) that Russian forces continue to make limited advances "but are very unlikely to be able to seize their objectives in this way."

"The doctrinally sound Russian response to this situation would be to end this campaign, accept a possibly lengthy operational pause, develop the plan for a new campaign, build up resources for that new campaign, and launch it when the resources and other conditions are ready," the report reads.

"The Russian military has not yet adopted this approach. It is instead continuing to feed small collections of reinforcements into an ongoing effort to keep the current campaign alive. We assess that that effort will fail."

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HEADLINE	03/20 UNHCR: 10M Ukrainians flee homes
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2022/03/20/ukraine-estimated-10-million-ukrainians-forced-leave-homes-russian-invasion/6171647792790/
GIST	<p>March 20 (UPI) -- An estimated 10 million Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes amid the Russian invasion, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said Sunday.</p> <p>Grandi said in a statement that the figure includes people who have been displaced within Ukraine as well as refugees who have fled to neighboring countries.</p> <p>"Among the responsibilities of those who wage war, everywhere in the world, is the suffering inflicted on civilians who are forced to flee their homes," Grandi said.</p>

The UNHCR also said [in a statement](#) Sunday that 902 civilians had been killed and 1,459 had been injured since the start of the Russian invasion. Of those killed, 75 of them have been children.

The agency noted that most of the civilian casualties were caused by the use of explosive weapons, such as shelling and missile strikes, and that the true figures are likely to be much higher.

Data from the UNHCR shows that nearly 3.4 million people have fled Ukraine since the start of the invasion.

Most of the refugees, about 2 million, left Ukraine for Poland -- a member country of the European Union's Schengen Area, which allows people to move freely between countries. As such, it remains unclear how many refugees have since continued to other countries within Europe.

Another 306,000 refugees have fled to Hungary while 246,000 fled to Slovakia, both of which are inside the Schengen Area. Another 527,000 have fled to Romania while 362,000 have fled to Moldova.

The refugee crisis comes as Ukraine faces a humanitarian crisis caused by advancing Russian forces, which have [bombed schools](#) and other facilities sheltering civilians.

Leaders in the Luhansk region of Ukraine have reported that a Russian tank had fired on residents of an elderly care home. The claim has not been independently verified but points to the worsening humanitarian crisis in the country.

Serhii Haidai, the head of the Luhansk region, said [in a post to Telegram](#) on Sunday that 56 elderly people who lived at a nursing home in Kreminna were "cynically and deliberately" killed on March 11 when a Russian tank opened fire on them.

Haidai said that another 15 people at the care home were "abducted" and taken to another elderly care home in Svatove, a town that has been taken over by Russian forces.

The Mariupol City Council said Saturday that residents of the besieged city in southern Ukraine have also been forcibly relocated to Russian territory against their will, which has been [confirmed by such residents](#) in comments to The New York Times.

The United Nations Children's Fund warned Saturday that children fleeing the war in Ukraine are at a [high risk for human trafficking](#) and exploitation.

More than 1.5 million children have fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion began in February as more than 500 unaccompanied children were identified crossing into Romania alone, according to UNICEF.

The humanitarian aid agency said that the true number of children who have been separated from their families is likely much higher.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Russia bombs Mariupol art school
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-bombs-art-school-housing-400-civilians-in-besieged-city-of-mariupol?ref=home
GIST	<p>An art school being used as a bomb shelter in the once-vibrant seaside Ukrainian town of Mariupol has been flattened in the latest relentless Russian strikes against civilian targets.</p> <p>It is unclear if any of the 400 people thought to be sheltering in the G12 Art School survived, according to the Mariupol city council in a statement on its Telegram channel early Sunday.</p> <p>The new attack comes as rescue workers continue to reach the more than 1,300 people thought to be trapped in a bomb shelter under the Drama theater across town, which was destroyed in an attack earlier in</p>

the week. [Continued shelling](#) on the city have hindered rescue efforts and it is unclear if any one who may have survived the original impact is still alive under the considerable rubble.

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy said the attacks against Mariupol, which now include the art school, theater, and a maternity hospital, will “go down in history of responsibility for war crimes.” In a statement released early Sunday he said, “To do this to a peaceful city, what the occupiers did, is a terror that will be remembered for centuries to come.”

The latest attacks are part of an ongoing effort by Russian forces to secure the vital port city of Mariupol, which has not had electricity, water or sewage service for several weeks. Mariupol remains one of the most important cities on Russia’s radar because it would provide a crucial land link between Crimea and the Russian-backed regions of Luhansk and Donetsk. Currently the two regions are joined only by Azov sea. Local authorities say 2,300 people have been killed in the city since Russia invaded last month. Many were dumped into hastily dug mass graves.

On Sunday, the U.K. Ministry of Defense, monitoring the situation closely, says there is no indication things will get better any time soon. “It is likely Russia will continue to use its heavy firepower to support assaults on urban areas as it looks to limit its own already considerable losses, at the cost of further civilian casualties,” U.K. Defense ministry said Sunday, adding that the constant bombardment has led to “widespread destruction and large numbers of civilian casualties.”

While those who remain in the besieged city are vulnerable to these increased attacks, disturbing news that some who have been allowed to leave are being held under duress in Russia. Ukrainian official Pyotr Andriuschenko, [told The New York Times](#) that as many as 4,500 residents of Mariupol were taken to the Russian city of Taganrog—which borders Ukraine in the southeast—without their passports. The forcible relocation of the residents has not been confirmed by Western media, but several Ukrainian relatives of those reportedly taken tell of terrifying circumstances under which Russians took them from their homes.

“Now the Russians are walking through the basements, and if there are people left there, they forcibly take them to Taganrog,” a doctor named Eduard Zarubin, who managed to escape told Ukrainian news outlets.

The mayor of Mariupol Vadym Boichenko compared taking citizens to Russia to the “horrific events of World War II, when the Nazis forcibly captured people.” He told the [Associated Press](#), “Children, elderly people are dying. The city is destroyed and it is wiped off the face of the earth.”

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HEADLINE	03/20 US commander: China militarized islands
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/business-china-beijing-xi-jinping-south-china-sea-d229070bc2373be1ca515390960a6e6c
GIST	<p>OVER THE SOUTH CHINA SEA (AP) — China has fully militarized at least three of several islands it built in the disputed South China Sea, arming them with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems, laser and jamming equipment and fighter jets in an increasingly aggressive move that threatens all nations operating nearby, a top U.S. military commander said Sunday.</p> <p>U.S. Indo-Pacific commander Adm. John C. Aquilino said the hostile actions were in stark contrast to Chinese President Xi Jinping's past assurances that Beijing would not transform the artificial islands in contested waters into military bases. The efforts were part of China’s flexing its military muscle, he said.</p> <p>“I think over the past 20 years we’ve witnessed the largest military buildup since World War II by the PRC,” Aquilino told The Associated Press in an interview, using the initials of China’s formal name. “They have advanced all their capabilities and that buildup of weaponization is destabilizing to the region.”</p> <p>There were no immediate comments from Chinese officials. Beijing maintains its military profile is purely defensive, arranged to protect what it says are its sovereign rights. But after years of increased military</p>

[spending](#), China now boasts the world's second largest defense budget after the U.S. and is rapidly modernizing its force with weapons systems including the J-20 stealth fighter, hypersonic missiles and two aircraft carriers, with a third under construction.

Aquilino spoke with the AP onboard a U.S. Navy reconnaissance aircraft that flew near Chinese-held outposts in the South China Sea's Spratly archipelago, [one of the most hotly contested regions](#) in the world. During the patrol, the P-8A Poseidon plane was repeatedly warned by Chinese callers that it illegally entered what they said was China's territory and ordered the plane to move away.

"China has sovereignty over the Spratly islands, as well as surrounding maritime areas. Stay away immediately to avoid misjudgment," one of the stern radio messages said in a veiled threat.

But the U.S. Navy plane dismissed the multiple warnings and pressed on defiantly with its reconnaissance in brief but tense moments witnessed by two AP journalists invited onboard. "I am a sovereign immune United States naval aircraft conducting lawful military activities beyond the national airspace of any coastal state," a U.S. pilot radioed back to the Chinese.

"Exercising these rights is guaranteed by international law and I am operating with due regard to the rights and duties of all states," he said.

Navy commanding officer Joel Martinez, who led the P-8A Poseidon's crew, said there has been an incident when a Chinese jet flew close to a U.S. aircraft in a dangerous maneuver in the disputed region. The U.S. flight crew calmly reminded the Chinese to comply with aviation safety regulations, he said. As the P-8A Poseidon flew as low as 15,000 feet (4,500 meters) near the Chinese-occupied reefs, some appeared to be like small cities on screen monitors, with multi-story buildings, warehouses, hangars, seaports, runways and white round structures Aquilino said were radars. Near Fiery Cross, more than 40 unspecified vessels could be seen apparently anchored.

Aquilino said the construction of missile arsenals, aircraft hangars, radar systems and other military facilities on Mischief Reef, Subi Reef and Fiery Cross appeared to have been completed but it remains to be seen if China will pursue the construction of military infrastructure in other areas.

"The function of those islands is to expand the offensive capability of the PRC beyond their continental shores," he said. "They can fly fighters, bombers plus all those offensive capabilities of missile systems." He said any military and civilian plane flying over the disputed waterway could easily get within range of the Chinese islands' missile system.

"So that's the threat that exists, that's why it's so concerning for the militarization of these islands," he said. "They threaten all nations who operate in the vicinity and all the international sea and airspace."

China sought to shore up its vast territorial claims over virtually the entire South China Sea by building island bases on coral atolls nearly a decade ago. The U.S. responded by sending its warships through the region in what it calls freedom of operation missions. The United States has no claims itself but has deployed Navy ships and aircraft for decades to patrol and promote free navigation in international waterway and airspace.

China routinely objects to any action by the U.S. military in the region. The other parties — the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei — claim all or part of the sea, through which approximately \$5 trillion in goods are shipped every year.

Despite China's aggression, the long-simmering territorial conflicts should only be resolved peacefully, Aquilino said, and cited the Philippine government's successful move to bring its disputes with China to international arbitration in 2013 as a good template.

	<p>A U.N.-backed arbitration tribunal that handled the case invalidated China's sweeping historical claims in the South China Sea under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. Beijing dismissed the ruling as sham and continues to defy it.</p> <p>Washington's main objective in the disputed region is "to prevent war" through deterrence and promote peace and stability, including by engaging American allies and partners in projects with that objective, Aquilino said.</p> <p>"Should deterrence fail, my second mission is to be prepared to fight and win," said Aquilino, who leads the largest U.S. combatant command with 380,000 military and civilian personnel covering 36 nations and territories.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Omicron subvariant slow, steady increase
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/as-omicrons-ba-2-subvariant-pushes-up-cases-globally-heres-what-it-looks-like-in-wa/
GIST	<p>While omicron's subvariant known as BA.2 races through Western Europe and prompts new spikes in cases, COVID-19 trends remain on the decline in Washington state, which has recorded a fairly slow spread of the variant so far.</p> <p>But some local researchers are questioning what its long-term impact could be in the United States and are predicting it could overtake the initial omicron variant in the coming months.</p> <p>BA.2 first emerged in the U.K. last December and over the past few months has spread throughout Europe. The World Health Organization said at the end of February the subvariant accounted for more than a third of new omicron cases around the world.</p> <p>In the United States, about 35,000 cases of BA.2 have been reported, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said this week.</p> <p>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data shows that, as of last week, BA.2 accounted for 23.1% of all new coronavirus infections in the U.S., up from 13.7% the week before. The original omicron variant remains dominant.</p> <p>In Washington state, BA.2 was first detected in January — and levels have remained fairly low since then, state epidemiologist Dr. Scott Lindquist said this week. The original omicron variant, known as BA.1, still accounts for more than 90% of new cases, according to a recent variant report from the state Department of Health.</p> <p>"It is not becoming the dominant force and it's certainly not driving an increase in cases," Lindquist said of BA.2.</p> <p>Overall coronavirus infection rates remain on the decline in the state, even when epidemiologists take into consideration an underreporting of cases due to mild infections and at-home tests, he added. As of this week, the state reported a seven-day infection rate of fewer than 70 cases per 100,000 — compared with more than 1,700 cases per 100,000 in January.</p> <p>King County has also reported a consistent decrease in cases, hospitalizations and deaths over the past couple of months, and is now averaging about 170 daily infections, three daily hospitalizations and three daily deaths.</p> <p>There are some signs, however, that BA.2 could be slowly but steadily spreading in the state. In the first week of February, the subvariant accounted for about 3.7% of the proportion of coronavirus variants sequenced, according to DOH's variant report. By the end of the month, the subvariant made up about 9.4%.</p>

One note, DOH says in the report, is that because of the pace of genome sequencing, the most recent time period is based on a smaller number of sequences and might be adjusted over time.

Still, Lindquist said that while BA.2 has been detected in Washington for more than a month, it has “not had the rapid increase like the initial omicron variant.”

It’s unclear if BA.2 could drive another uptick in cases in Washington in the coming months, but it’s likely. Trevor Bedford, a computational biologist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center who’s been tracking local COVID outbreaks since the start of the pandemic, said this week he strongly suspects the subvariant will eventually displace the original omicron variant in the country in the coming weeks and months.

BA.2 appears to be about 30% more transmissible than the omicron variant, Bedford said, noting that although spike protein mutations between the initial omicron variant and BA.2 are similar, there’s a suite of mutations elsewhere in the genome that appears to increase transmissibility.

“Thirty percent is roughly the difference between nonvariant viruses and alpha viruses, so it’s not as big as the jump from delta, but it is significant,” Bedford said during a [Brotman Baty Institute webinar](#) this week. Alpha was the first variant of concern, according to the CDC.

Fortunately, he said, early research shows BA.2 infections are likely much more mild than those from the original omicron.

“A lot of the apparent reduced severity is due to immunity, that a large fraction of omicron cases were in individuals with prior immunity ... which causes cases to be more mild,” Bedford said. “But in addition to this, there’s a real effect on intrinsic severity.”

While researchers are still trying to figure out if the virus could become more severe again at some point, the reduction in severity and increase in population immunity have caused a significant drop in COVID deaths in the U.S. and other parts of the world, he said.

It’s difficult for researchers to predict how much BA.2 will change caseloads this year, Lindquist said, but he assured Washingtonians that the region’s COVID surveillance methods would catch any increases in infections quickly.

“I have a lot of confidence in our ability to look for new variants,” Lindquist said. “We have all the tools on how to prepare ourselves and prevent this from going forward.”

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HEADLINE	03/19 High cost driving hurts living Seattle area
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/the-cost-of-driving-lands-hard-in-the-seattle-area-on-those-scraping-by/
GIST	<p>LAKESWOOD — “Look at that,” said Dora Poqui, nodding toward her television as it flashed a preview of the evening news. “Every time I see the news. \$5.27 for gasoline. I know our pockets are going to be hurting this week.”</p> <p>In fact, Poqui’s pockets hurt most weeks lately. Gone are the days when she and her husband thought they might save to buy a home. The pandemic has landed hard on them, and now they share an apartment in Lakewood with her mother, who was dozing in a reclining chair, and her granddaughter, who was holed up in one of the two bedrooms down the hall. Instead of a house, Poqui now saves for meat and cereal, for a family member’s funeral in Mexico and, as an in-home caregiver, for the cost of driving a car.</p> <p>“A lot of these clients require transportation,” she said of her work. “That’s why they hire you because they need somebody to go do their essential work.”</p>

Poqui guesses she spends close to \$700 every month on her car. The payments alone exceed \$400. There's also insurance, regular maintenance, her license tabs. Then there's the gasoline, the cost spiraling upward for months. The state, which contracts with her for her caregiver work, reimburses some of her expenses, but it's a fraction of the reality, she said. The weight of it all is heavy enough that she finds herself choosing between renewing her tabs or servicing her brakes.

"When do you make enough to say, 'OK, I'm going to relax and not worry about this paycheck?'" she said.

For the Puget Sound area's working class, who teeter on the edge of poverty, the cost of fuel and owning a car is another pixel in the larger portrait of how difficult living in the Seattle region has become. In February, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that nearly 600,000 people in Washington said it would be "very difficult" to afford basic household expenses. In August, that number was just under 400,000.

A \$60 tank of fuel might not loom largest in Poqui's budget, but it salts the wounds already left by the cost of rent, groceries and utilities.

Like other "essential workers," there are few opportunities for Poqui to reduce the cost of driving. Her most recent client lived in Tacoma, where Poqui cannot afford to live, forcing her into a 30-minute commute each way. Transit near her is limited and, besides, she sometimes needs to drive her clients to appointments or pick up medicine from the pharmacy. Working remotely is, of course, not an option.

So she looks elsewhere for cuts: eating meat twice a week instead of every day, adding more water to the soup, waiting on getting that new pair of shoes.

The cost of car ownership was surging even before the pandemic. The toll of financing a car jumped 24% in 2019, according to AAA, pushing the annual cost of owning a new car close to \$10,000. As the pandemic scrambled the normal flow of the supply chain and processing chips grew scarce, the price of buying a used vehicle went into orbit. And then came the spike in gas prices, now the highest they've been since 2008 when adjusted for inflation.

It's an expense many might not fully comprehend; one survey of 6,000 drivers in Germany found that car owners underestimate the cost of owning a vehicle by an average of 50%. Near Seattle, it's a burden likely to be borne heaviest by those already priced out of the major cities.

"If you go around to some of these satellite cities, that is where you will very often find people who have scraped enough to afford and they're enduring the commutes," said Jacob Vigdor, a professor at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy and Governance. His current research, due to be released soon, shows it's people in the suburbs and exurbs who are struggling the most, despite the slightly lower cost of living.

And so, as car ownership becomes more expensive, said Vigdor, "you're taking the component of the workforce that was already the most economically squeezed and you're squeezing them harder."

Breaking points

In the past month, the price of gasoline in Washington has jumped 80 cents a gallon, to \$4.74 on Friday, according to AAA. It's a monthslong trend that accelerated with the onset of the war in Ukraine.

Maria Valera's home on Aurora Avenue North is a one-bedroom apartment she shares with two of her four boys. "I feel like Alice in Wonderland," she said, quickly scanning her living space. "The apartment gets smaller as my kids get taller."

It's the only way she can afford to stay in Seattle; her two younger kids are both close to graduating from high school and she doesn't want to force them to change school districts so late.

Valera works at Sea-Tac Airport, preparing meals for flights and airport lounges. Her shift begins at 3 a.m. “I wake up at 2,” she said. “I have to jump on the freeway at 2:30, no matter what, because it’s almost a half an hour.”

Even when gas was cheap, life in Seattle was a struggle for Valera, a widowed single mother. With a budget already whittled to a point, the difference of \$20 a week in gasoline means she dilutes her laundry detergent and eats peanut butter and jelly so her kids can have larger portions of pasta.

“We don’t have no choice,” she said. “It feels like modern slavery.”

Inflation, which reached nearly 8% over the past 12 months, overall hurts low-income workers disproportionately. A Washington Post analysis found those in the bottom 20% of earners spend a significantly larger proportion of their pay on necessities like shelter, food and gasoline, and rising costs exacerbate that gap.

“The breaking point is going to be an individual thing,” said Vigdor. “There’s a straw that breaks the camel’s back. For some people, the gas prices might be that.”

Valera’s base pay works out to roughly \$40,000 a year. She works enough overtime that she can push that to over \$50,000, but her income is nevertheless near the bottom quarter of people living in Seattle. And yet she pays the same price at the pump for gas. She has few alternatives to driving; taking transit would mean getting out of bed at close to midnight.

The current transit system is not built for people like Valera, said Alex Hudson, executive director of the Transportation Choices Coalition, which advocates for more alternatives to cars.

“We have forced people to live in a world where there are very few real or convenient options for anything other than a car,” said Hudson.

Valera nearly hit a breaking point recently when her car broke down on the side of the road at 2:30 in the morning. She managed to catch an Uber to work, but had to take a \$600 payday loan to replace the car’s alternator, plus \$95 in interest.

“Sometimes, in a single moment, you just want to tap out,” she said, “and say, please, timeout. Timeout.”

Poqui is now in the process of acquiring a new client: her mother, who is in the early stages of dementia. Once the paperwork comes through, it could mean fewer miles on the road, fewer dollars toward the gas tank.

But she sees a deeper problem, picked open by the new focus on gas prices. Caregivers like herself are considered essential, but she only makes \$19 an hour right now, and even that rate is only because she receives a pandemic-related, \$2 an hour “hazard pay” bump. “There’s not going to be enough caregivers, because who wants to work at this rate?” she said. “You know Target is paying \$24?”

“You can bet that there are people who aren’t able to make it to work because they can’t afford the gas to get there,” Hudson said, “and they don’t have another option.”

Vigdor points back to his work showing it’s people just outside of cities who live closest to the edge, more so than those within the cities. “They’re not necessarily planning on \$5 a gallon gas, so the struggles that we see on the fringes of these metro areas, they’re going to get more severe,” he said.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Addressing equity in I-5 bridge replacement
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/i-5-bridge-replacement-program-among-first-infrastructure-projects-to-address-equity/

Bridges, roads, infrastructure — they're inanimate things. So how can they not be fair to everyone? How can they not be equitable?

"We know that the (Department of Transportation has) a commitment to equity on this program, as well as the program partners," said Greg Johnson, program administrator of the Interstate Bridge Replacement Program, which aims to replace the span over the Columbia River between Washington and Oregon. "And that comes out of a realization that transportation has not always been done in an equitable manner."

In just the Oregon and Washington region, the harsh realities of the impacts infrastructure can have on communities are still seen and heard. There's the failure of the levee that led to the destruction of Vanport, Oregon's second-largest city, which had a large Black population. There's the displacement of large swaths of families in Portland's Albina neighborhood to make way for Interstate 5.

"There are instances around the country where freeways or transportation infrastructure were placed with no consideration for the community that it was impacting, the people that it was displacing," Johnson said.

The Interstate Bridge Replacement Program staff is hoping not to repeat that history. The bridge project is one of the first in the nation to focus on prioritizing both equity and climate considerations.

Among the counties in the region, Johnell Bell, equity officer for the Interstate Bridge Replacement Program, pointed out that Clark County has seen the most significant growth by people of color in the region.

Since 2010, Clark County has added nearly 78,000 residents, 76% of whom are people of color, according to the 2020 U.S. Census.

And while housing costs are 16% lower for folks living in Vancouver as compared with Portland, transportation costs are 10% higher.

"We know, by our own survey data — not scientific but as our own survey data — that communities of color are more frequently crossing the bridge than white counterparts," Bell said. "So there's a strong equity argument to make as to why we really need to replace this aging infrastructure."

That's inequitable itself as communities of color see their neighborhoods being gentrified, he added.

"They've been pushed further out to the edge and are forced to drive with sometimes no access to transit modes," Johnson said. "So we're looking — No. 1 — to expand the high-capacity transit footprint, but also to make sure that folks who have to drive are not sitting in backups because of this bridge."

Expanding transit access

A new bridge would help Clark County's growing communities of color, said Jasmine Tolbert, president of Vancouver's NAACP.

"While we might be residing in Clark County, we're also working over in Portland and surrounding areas," said Tolbert.

Having an accessible bridge is important for helping folks who want to live in Clark County but work in either Oregon or Washington and not have the bridge be a barrier, she added.

"The deciding factor, I think, is going to be crucial for our overall economy, but especially for BIPOC to be able to have choice in what they want to do," she added. BIPOC is an acronym meaning Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

One large component of expanding access for communities of color will be expanding transit options.

“Just the versatility and being able to — whether or not you drive, whether or not you are differently abled — have access to mass transit bridges the gap for all of that,” said Tolbert.

Tolbert would like to see transit expand throughout the county.

Still, with the history of people being displaced because of new infrastructure projects, it’s always a question as to if it could happen with the construction of a new I-5 Bridge.

As much as Tolbert is eager for the idea of a new bridge, significant displacement would change her perspective.

Displacement hasn’t been a huge topic of conversation in building the new I-5 Bridge up until this point, though the topic has come up.

When construction began on the current I-5 Bridge, the overwhelming majority of people who lived in Vancouver’s downtown area were white, according to census records from 1910. Buildings had to come down to make way for the bridge then. And maps have not yet been decided on or released that will show if buildings will need to come down now to make way for the newest bridge.

On the east side of the bridge, there is an Indigenous burial site.

“We are working with the tribes to make sure that we are touching this area as lightly as possible and, if possible, not expanding beyond our existing footprint,” said Johnson.

Anti-displacement plan

The city of Vancouver has adopted a long-term planning anti-displacement strategy.

“We’ve been in close conversations about how, within the context of this program, we can further some of that dialogue,” Bell said.

The project’s equity advisory group has had conversations about the project and its potential harm on communities.

“Primarily, what’s important is how do we ensure that we’re not creating further harm by making investments in infrastructure,” said Bell.

Johnson and Bell are sensitive to the issues around infrastructure, having both had personal interactions with infrastructure that weren’t always positive. Johnson was displaced with his family as a child as their home was taken to make way for an expanded roadway.

“The sensitivity that we bring to the issue, I think, is tremendously important,” said Johnson, “having lived experience with the inequity of the system at times.”

The project has multiple advisory groups that contribute to the process, including an equity advisory group.

“A really unique thing about our fabric in this region is how connected we really are,” said Bell. “That’s the beauty of equity. We all have a story.

“How do we really leverage programs like this to accentuate those stories to bring us closer together, not push us farther apart?”

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HEADLINE	03/20 Real estate sticker shock not just in cities
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/its-not-just-cities-seeing-sticker-shock-in-the-housing-market/

Retiree Anthony Maggi put his Republic home on the market five years ago and got no takers.

Now, he's trying again, with one big difference: The list price for his four-bedroom, 2,200-square-foot home has more than doubled.

"When we put it on the market in 2017, we put it at \$89,000," Maggi said. "It's now on the market at \$199,900."

Meanwhile, Realtor Cynda Bragg just closed a deal for a couple selling their home in the woods outside the northeast Washington town for \$224,000, almost three times what it sold for in April 2020.

Bragg said the sellers initially listed the home at \$195,000, before receiving some advice from someone from the West Side.

"This is too cheap," Bragg said they were told. "You can get more for this."

As home prices soar in the cities, what's happening in some of Eastern Washington's rural counties is just as dramatic: The most affordable real estate markets in Washington are rapidly becoming a lot less affordable.

Nowhere is that more true than Ferry County, which is often ranked as the most affordable county in the state by the University of Washington's Center for Real Estate Research. According to the center's most recent report, the median sale price for a home in Ferry County leapt up by 33% in 2021 — the biggest increase last year on the dry side of the state.

Bragg has been selling homes in Ferry County for seven years, and she's watched prices steadily go up. Since 2013, the median price of a home sold in Ferry County has risen by 71%.

"One problem is our housing shortage," she said. "In Ferry County, as of this morning, there are 19 houses on the market. With low supply and high demand, it just pushes prices up."

In some ways, the dynamics are similar to those in the cities: steep price increases, people from cities moving in for the good deals and investors looking to flip properties. First-time homebuyers are left out of the picture.

"It's been a bit crazy for the last couple of years," said Rachel Siracuse, Ferry County assessor and member of the Republic City Council. "I've been here a long time, going on 22 years, and we've never seen anything like it."

Nationwide, according to Redfin, rural home prices rose 16% in January, a steeper rise than either suburban or urban home prices. James Young, director of the research center, said rural and urban areas all over Washington are experiencing the same pattern.

"People are seeking value," he said. "People who don't have to live in Seattle or in a bigger city are going to the smaller towns. You're also getting a lot of older people retiring."

Spokane County saw another big leap in prices — a median of \$390,200 that was 23% higher than last year. Since 2013, prices here have simply exploded, rising more than 120%.

Many rural counties are losing population or growing very little, and economic opportunity is limited. Median incomes have been relatively flat — certainly not following the double-digit patterns of recent home price increases.

Siracuse, the Ferry County assessor, said there have been recent positive signs in the local economy. In the not-too-distant past, businesses would close up on Main Street in Republic — and go onto the market for years at a stretch.

	<p>“For decades,” she said. “We couldn’t give ’em away.”</p> <p>In recent years, though, businesses in the town have sold and opened with new ventures — a coffee shop, restaurants, a hardware store. At the same time, she said, her daughter and son-in-law can’t afford to break into the housing market.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Seattle ‘flash mob’ rally support for Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/seattle-marchers-calling-no-fly-zone-ukraine/QSV7MFHN7NHERPV26BH4XM4HO4/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A plea was made on Seattle’s streets on Saturday for a no-fly zone over war-ravaged Ukraine.</p> <p>Hundreds of people turned out for a rally and march through downtown Seattle, calling on NATO to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine.</p> <p>They believe that is the only way to save lives in their homeland. They delivered that message to a congressional leader from Washington state.</p> <p>They called it a “flash mob” of support for Ukraine, this raising of umbrellas in the colors of the besieged Eastern European country. It is a place that is dear to their hearts.</p> <p>The pain that Juliya Maslova feels needs no translation. She and her children escaped Ukraine, leaving behind her military husband to fight.</p> <p>“He protects Kharkiv,” said Maslova. “He’s doing well. He believes in victory like we all.”</p> <p>A victory that, if it comes, will be at a very high cost.</p> <p>“The third World War has kind of already started but not all, not everybody understands that,” said Yevhiiii Krasnoborov, of South Seattle. “It doesn’t matter because people are dying.”</p> <p>So, they took to the streets of Seattle, calling on NATO to impose and enforce a no-fly zone to stop Russia’s bombing of Ukraine, threatening the lives of those they know and love.</p> <p>“My mother-in-law lives there,” said Tanya Schmat, of Everett. “I have cousins. We have grandkids.”</p> <p>But President Biden has said a no-fly zone would be tantamount to starting a global war. So, the U.S. has been sending loads of military support instead.</p> <p>“Not enough,” yelled a man from the crowd at Seattle Center. “Not enough, Congressman!”</p> <p>And they made no secret of what they want as Democratic Congressman Adam Smith spoke at this rally after the march.</p> <p>“I’m not going to lie to you,” Rep. Smith, chair of the House Armed Services Committee, told the crowd. “We do not want NATO to go to war with Russia and start World War III.”</p> <p>It is a message he knows is unlikely to satisfy anyone here.</p> <p>“I can sincerely understand where these folks are coming from,” he said in an interview. “But we cannot afford to start World War III.”</p>

	<p>The people here say that the rain that is falling are actually tears from their homeland — tears for a country that is under relentless assault.</p> <p>They want that assault to end because this is personal to them. The people under assault are their family members and they say the only way to do that is to close the sky.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Study: alcohol-related deaths up in 2020
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/alcohol-related-deaths-spiked-in-first-year-of-covid-19-pandemic-study-shows
GIST	<p>A new study suggests that alcohol-related deaths increased during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.</p> <p>Researchers published their findings Friday in the Journal of the American Medical Association.</p> <p>Scientists gathered mortality data from the National Center for Health Statistics involving people over 16 years old from 2019 and 2020. They also obtained data in the first half of 2021 from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Their findings showed that alcohol-related deaths increased between 2019 and 2020 from 78,927 deaths to 99, 017 deaths. They said deaths from other causes had smaller increases.</p> <p>Researchers noted that alcohol-related deaths accounted for 2.8% of all deaths in 2019 and 3.0% in 2020. The number and rate of alcohol-related deaths increased approximately 25% between 2019 and 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>They said there were increases for all age groups with the largest increase occurring for people between 35 to 44 years old, with a nearly 40% increase, and 25 to 34 years old, with a 37% increase. They also saw larger increases among men compared to women.</p> <p>"Deaths involving alcohol reflect hidden tolls of the pandemic," the study's authors said. "Increased drinking to cope with pandemic-related stressors, shifting alcohol policies, and disrupted treatment access are all possible contributing factors."</p> <p>Researchers said they don't know if alcohol-related deaths will decline as the pandemic wanes and whether public policy changes are needed.</p> <p>Some states have also noticed an increase in alcohol-related deaths as the COVID-19 pandemic lingers.</p> <p>Alcohol-related deaths in Wisconsin rose almost 25% in 2020, according to a report released in January.</p> <p>Data compiled by the nonpartisan Wisconsin Policy Forum shows 1,077 Wisconsin residents died of alcohol-related causes in 2020, up from 865 in 2019. The data was compiled from U.S. residents' death certificates.</p> <p>Other states reported an increase in alcohol sales. Sales at municipal liquor stores in Minnesota soared in 2020 for a record-breaking year. Sales at the state's 213 "munis" jumped 10% during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a report released in October by State Auditor Julie Blaha. In recent years, a typical sales increase has been in the range of 1 to 3%.</p> <p>According to the International Wines and Spirits Record, Americans consumed 2% more alcohol in 2020 than in 2019. It was the biggest year-over-year increase since 2002.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Seattle returns historic artifacts to tribe
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/seattle-to-return-nearly-300-artifacts-to-upper-skagit-tribe

GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Hundreds of historic artifacts will soon be returned to the Upper Skagit Tribe from the city of Seattle.</p> <p>The city has had the stone and bone artifacts since Seattle City Light crews excavated the Gorge Dam site in 2013 for a hotel project, KUOW reported. The Seattle City Council voted this week that the tribe should have ownership of them. It was a unanimous vote, 8-0.</p> <p>The Upper Skagit Tribe formerly had a permanent winter village along the Skagit River. Part of the land, northeast of Seattle, is now considered city of Seattle property, as part of hydroelectric dam operations to generate hydropower for Seattle.</p> <p>The artifacts are currently housed in Marblemount, Washington, at the North Cascades Visitor Center.</p> <p>The new city ordinance says the tribe wants to reclaim them because the items hold historic and cultural significance. Among them are flaked cobble tools, scrapers, chopping and cutting devices, and hammerstones.</p> <p>The Tribe historically carried out fishing, shellfishing, hunting and gathering activities from the saltwater areas all the way to the mountainous upper reaches of the Skagit River, according to tribal history.</p> <p>When white settlers seized land in the 1880s, the Upper Skagit Tribe says more than one hundred canoes of people met with settlers to protest land takeover.</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	03/20 Russia online hate group backs Putin's war
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/male-state-the-russian-online-hate-group-backing-putins-war/
GIST	<p>They were banned and designated as extremist by a Russian court in October 2021. But Male State — the online gang of racists, homophobes and misogynists Bellingcat investigated last year — has retained a significant following and managed to become a vocal and vile online booster of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>While Russia's President Vladimir Putin has stated that one of the main aims of his country's military action is the "denazification" of Ukraine, vile anti-semitic posts and calls for Ukraine's leaders to be executed are a regular feature on Male State channels.</p> <p>As Bellingcat detailed in its previous investigation, Male State's tens of thousands of members fight against everything they perceive as a threat to Russia. They wrap up their hate in an extreme right-wing ideology they describe as "national patriarchy", all under the informal leadership of a college dropout named Vladislav Pozdnyakov.</p>
Return to Top	Read more at Bellingcat

HEADLINE	03/18 Zelenskyy deepfake troubles experts
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/zelenskyy-deepfake-troubles-experts/
GIST	<p>Several deepfake video experts called a doctored video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that went viral this week before social media platforms removed it a poorly executed example of the form, but nonetheless damaging.</p> <p>Elements of the Zelenskyy deepfake — which purported to show him calling for surrender — made it easy to debunk, they said. But that won't always be the case.</p>

[Soon after Facebook announced Wednesday that it had quickly taken down the doctored video](#) of Zelenskyy calling on Ukrainians to surrender, [Shane Huntley, who manages and leads Google's Threat Analysis Group, tweeted](#) that what the Zelenskyy video “may end up showing is that people are actually pretty aware of how easy it is to fake videos and how quickly they get reported and taken down.”

That is [a view which some disinformation experts refuted](#), noting that the Zelenskyy video was not representative of the typical [deepfake](#). It was poorly made, involved a high-profile figure and had been “pre-bunked” by Zelenskyy’s administration, making it less effective than many such videos.

“While crude fakes might be easy to detect, debunk, and take down, this doesn’t mean that more sophisticated fakes won’t have a larger impact,” Hany Farid, a University of California at Berkeley professor who specializes in digital image analysis, said via email. “Even crude fakes will remain online for hours or days and can have an impact in a fast moving war.”

Farid also emphasized that even the poorest quality fakes pollute the information ecosystem, “making it easier to cast doubt on real videos and generally making it easier to cast doubt on everything that we see and hear online.”

How ‘pre-bunking’ helped

Other experts said the Zelenskyy deepfake failed not only because of how poorly executed it was, but also because of the Ukrainian president’s effective “pre-bunking” of a likely Russian deepfake purporting to show him calling for surrender — that is, steps Ukraine took to warn in advance that Russia would attempt to pass off a deepfake as reality.

This pre-bunking helped Ukrainians more readily recognize the deepfake as phony, according to Roman Osadchuk, a Ukraine-based Eurasia disinformation researcher with the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. He said Ukrainian soldiers warned each other over Telegram to be on guard for a deepfake from Russia suggesting capitulation back on March 2. [That same day, the Ukraine government’s Center for Strategic Communication warned](#) citizens to expect a deepfake surrender video.

Osadchuk [called the presumably Russian-made deepfake video “basically a pre-record job.”](#) He noted that Zelenskyy’s head is out of place and the subject’s voice is clearly not Zelenskyy’s. He said many Ukrainians had ridiculed the video upon seeing it. In addition to Facebook and YouTube, the clip was also posted on a [Ukrainian TV station](#). The Atlantic Council said it [also appeared on Telegram and on a Russian social media channel](#).

Zelenskyy’s team also showed savvy by [quickly shooting and distributing its own video and social media posts calling the surrender deepfake a hoax](#), Osadchuk said.

The Zelenskyy surrender video is “the best case in terms of detecting a deepfake, said Sam Gregory, program director at Witness, a non-profit which helps people use video to protect human rights.

He said the poor quality of the video; the Ukrainian government’s advance warning to citizens to expect a surrender deepfake; Zelenskyy’s prominence and recognizability as a target; and the ease with which social media platforms could identify the video as a deepfake all made it a slam dunk for debunking. Many deepfake videos are harder to spot, Gregory warned.

The Zelenskyy video was an easy call for Facebook to remove, he said, but other less obvious deepfakes can be incredibly destructive, particularly when they play out in contexts where social media companies and journalists “don’t have the full weight of a public figure [like Zelenskyy] behind them to report it.”

The inherent threat

Gregory said [what makes deepfakes so threatening](#) is that they pay what he called “the liars’ dividend.”

“This is the idea that you can claim that real footage is false, and put pressure on journalists to prove it,” Gregory said. “Because of the existence of deepfakes, it’s easier to say you can’t trust any footage and that, of course, undermines truthful accounts.”

Christopher Paul, an information warfare expert with the RAND Corp. think tank, said he thinks of the technological evolution of deepfakes and the lack of availability of effective detection software as a “cat and mouse game.” He said it is clear to him that Facebook spotted this deepfake through human intervention rather than automation.

“At the moment, the cat and mouse game favors the aggressor in terms of not being able to spot the fakes in an automated way,” Paul said.

He said that deepfake producers also have proven they learn from failure. Once experts began warning the public to detect deepfakes by noting that human subjects in them failed to blink, producers responded by writing code to insert blinking.

“As deepfakes get better, it will be harder,” Paul said. “We may discover it eventually, but how much damage can it do in the hours or days or weeks before it’s disclosed or exposed?”

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HEADLINE	03/21 ‘CryptoRom’ scam targets mobile users
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/03/cryptorom-crypto-scam-abusing-iphone.html
GIST	<p>Social engineering attacks leveraging a combination of romantic lures and cryptocurrency fraud have been luring unsuspecting victims into installing fake apps by taking advantage of legitimate iOS features like TestFlight and Web Clips.</p> <p>Cybersecurity company Sophos, which has named the organized crime campaign "CryptoRom," characterized it as a wide-ranging global scam.</p> <p>"This style of cyber-fraud, known as sha zhu pan (杀猪盘) — literally 'pig butchering plate' — is a well-organized, syndicated scam operation that uses a combination of often romance-centered social engineering and fraudulent financial applications and websites to ensnare victims and steal their savings after gaining their confidence," Sophos analyst Jagadeesh Chandraiah said in a report published last week.</p> <p>The campaign works by approaching potential targets through dating apps like Bumble, Tinder, Facebook Dating, and Grindr, before moving the conversation to messaging apps such as WhatsApp and urging the victims to install a cryptocurrency trading application that's designed to mimic popular brands and lock people out of their accounts and freeze their funds.</p> <p>Previous variants of the social engineering scam observed in October 2021 were found to leverage lookalike App Store pages to deceive people into installing the rogue iOS apps, not to mention abuse Apple's Developer Enterprise Program to deploy sketchy mobile provisioning profiles to distribute the malware.</p> <p>But the new attack wave observed by Sophos takes advantage of Apple's TestFlight beta testing framework and a device management feature called Web Clips, which allows URLs to specific web pages to be placed on the home screen of users' iOS devices just like a traditional application.</p> <p>Once installed, the crooks promise the individuals huge financial returns in return for making a monetary investment, while artificially manipulating the numbers on the fake app to "reinforce the con" and convince the victims into believing that "they are making money" through the platform.</p> <p>"The scam doesn't end with just fooling victims into investing," Chandraiah elaborated. "When victims try to withdraw funds from their big 'profit,' the crooks use the app to inform them that they need to pay</p>

	a 'tax' of 20% of their profits before funds can be withdrawn — and threaten that all their investments will be confiscated by tax authorities if they do not pay."
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HEADLINE	03/21 New backdoor targets French entities
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/03/new-backdoor-targets-french-entities.html
GIST	<p>Researchers have exposed a new targeted email campaign aimed at French entities in the construction, real estate, and government sectors that leverages the Chocolatey Windows package manager to deliver a backdoor called Serpent on compromised systems.</p> <p>Enterprise security firm Proofpoint attributed the attacks to a likely advanced threat actor based on the tactics and the victimology patterns observed. The ultimate objective of the campaign remains presently unknown.</p> <p>"The threat actor attempted to install a backdoor on a potential victim's device, which could enable remote administration, command and control (C2), data theft, or deliver other additional payloads," Proofpoint researchers said in a report shared with The Hacker News.</p> <p>The phishing lure that triggers the infection sequence makes use of a resume-themed subject line, with the attached macro-embedded Microsoft Word document masquerading as information related to the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).</p> <p>Enabling the macros results in its execution, which retrieves a seemingly harmless image file hosted on a remote server but actually contains a Base64-encoded PowerShell script that's obscured using steganography, a little-used method of concealing malicious code within an image or audio in order to circumvent detection.</p> <p>The PowerShell script, in turn, is engineered to install the Chocolatey utility on the Windows machine, which is then utilized to install the Python package installer pip, the latter of which acts as conduit to install the PySocks proxy library.</p> <p>Also retrieved by the same PowerShell script is another image file from the same remote server that includes the camouflaged Python backdoor dubbed Serpent, which comes with capabilities to execute commands transmitted from the C2 server.</p> <p>In addition to steganography, the use of widely recognized tools such as Chocolatey as an initial payload for follow-on deployment of genuine Python packages is an attempt to stay under the radar and not be flagged as a threat, Proofpoint said.</p> <p>The attacks have not unearthed associations with a previously identified actor or group, but are suspected to be the work of a sophisticated hacking crew.</p> <p>"This is a novel application of a variety of technologies that are often legitimately used within organizations," Sherrod DeGrippe, vice president of threat research and detection at Proofpoint, said in a statement.</p> <p>"It capitalizes on many organizations', specifically technical groups, desire to allow their users to be 'self-sufficient' in regards to self-tooling and package managers. Additionally, the use of steganography is unusual and something we don't see regularly."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Most Hood plants up after 'cyber event'
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/most-hood-plants-after-cyber-event-schools-concerned

GIST	<p>Most HP Hood LLC plants are back up and running after the dairy company's network system was the victim of a "cyber security event," but some school districts are concerned that they will have a milk shortage as a result.</p> <p>"Out of an abundance of caution, we took all of our plants off line," last weekend, Lynne Bohan, a spokesperson for the Lynnfield, Massachusetts-based company said in a statement Friday. "As a result, we were unable to manufacture or receive raw materials including milk."</p> <p>She added, "Our IT team and others have been working around the clock to resolve the issue and I am happy to report that most of our plants are up and running."</p> <p>She said the matter is still under investigation.</p> <p>Hood is a main dairy supplier in New England. In Peterborough, New Hampshire, the superintendent at the ConVal School District said it will be affected by anticipated milk shortages caused by the cyberattack.</p> <p>Superintendent Kimberly Rizzo Saunders said in a statement Wednesday it has been made aware by its foodservice vendor that "Hood anticipates significant impacts in its ordering and delivery processes throughout the next week."</p> <p>She said the majority of meals are expected to be offered with 100% juice or water as a substitute beverage.</p> <p>"Our Hood Sales, Customer Service, and Procurement teams have been communicating and working closely with all of those who may have been affected by this disruption," Bohan said Friday.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Cloud-based email threats surge
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cloudbased-email-threats-surge-2021/
GIST	<p>There was a 50% year-on-year surge in cloud-based email threats in 2021, but a drop in ransomware and business email compromise (BEC) detections as attacks became more targeted, according to Trend Micro.</p> <p>The security vendor's 2021 roundup report, Navigating New Frontiers, was compiled from data collected by customer-installed products and cloud-based threat intelligence.</p> <p>It revealed that Trend Micro blocked 25.7 million email threats targeting Google Workspace and Microsoft 365 users last year, versus 16.7 million in 2020.</p> <p>The number of phishing attempts almost doubled during the period, as threat actors continued to target home workers. Of these, 38% were focused on stealing credentials, the report claimed.</p> <p>However, some threat detections declined: ransomware attempts dropped by 21% and BEC by 11% in 2021.</p> <p>While this might appear good news, Trend Micro claimed this is evidence of more targeted attacks aimed at larger organizations.</p> <p>In the case of BEC, Trend Micro blocked a higher percentage of advanced BEC emails, which could only be detected by comparing the writing style of the attacker with that of the intended sender. These comprised 47% of all BEC attempts in 2021 versus 23% in 2020, with the remainder detected by analyzing behavior and intent.</p> <p>BEC was the highest-grossing cybercrime type of 2020, generating losses of nearly \$1.9bn, according to the FBI.</p>

	<p>Elsewhere, the report warned organizations that despite the surge in newly published vulnerabilities in 2021, nearly a quarter (22%) of exploits sold in the cybercrime underground last year were over three years old.</p> <p>Overall, Trend Micro blocked over 94 billion threats in 2021, a 42% increase from the previous year.</p> <p>In the cloud, misconfigured systems were also a critical risk factor in 2021. The report claimed AWS Key Management Service (AWS KMS) and Amazon Elastic Container Service (Amazon ECS) were the Amazon services with some of the highest misconfiguration rates.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 EASA: jamming navigation satellite signals
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/aircraft-disrupt-satellite-jamming/
GIST	<p>The EU Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has been forced to issue an alert following reports that aircraft in the region have had to reroute or change destination due to the jamming of navigation satellite signals.</p> <p>EASA claimed that, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, disruption of Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS) has intensified in several regions: Kaliningrad, eastern Finland, the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean.</p> <p>“The effects of GNSS jamming and/or possible spoofing were observed by aircraft in various phases of their flights, in certain cases leading to re-routing or even to change the destination due to the inability to perform a safe landing procedure,” the warning noted.</p> <p>“Under the present conditions, it is not possible to predict GNSS outages and their effects. The magnitude of the issues generated by such outage would depend upon the extent of the area concerned, on the duration and on the phase of flight of the affected aircraft.”</p> <p>EASA released a long list of recommended mitigations should aircraft encounter a degradation of GNSS signal in flight.</p> <p>In related news, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency and FBI have issued a warning of possible cyber-threats to satellite communications (satcom) networks, which could ramp up risk for providers and their customers.</p> <p>“Given the current geopolitical situation, CISA’s Shields Up initiative requests that all organizations significantly lower their threshold for reporting and sharing indications of malicious cyber-activity,” it said.</p> <p>“CISA and FBI strongly encourages critical infrastructure organizations and other organizations that are either Satcom network providers or customers to review and implement the mitigations outlined in this CSA to strengthen satcom network cybersecurity.”</p> <p>Network providers should monitor anomalous traffic at ingress and egress points, while both providers and customers should roll out multi-factor authentication and least privilege access policies, the alert recommended.</p> <p>Other best-practice security measures listed included: strong encryption of communications; regular patching and vulnerability management; configuration management; network log monitoring; and maintenance of comprehensive incident response plans.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Cyclops Blink malware targets Asus
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/cyclops-blink-malware-asus/

GIST	<p>Security researchers are warning that the Russian state operatives behind a sophisticated malware campaign are broadening their targets to include Asus and other router manufacturers.</p> <p>Trend Micro revealed in a blog post yesterday that there are currently 200 victims of the Cyclops Blink malware worldwide. While it originally targeted WatchGuard appliances, there's now evidence that the campaign is expanding in a bid to build a botnet capable of further attacks.</p> <p>That's because the targets in their own right do not seem to hold any geopolitical, economic or military advantage for the Russian Sandworm group thought to be behind the campaign.</p> <p>"For example, some of the live C&Cs are hosted on WatchGuard devices used by a law firm in Europe, a medium-sized company producing medical equipment for dentists in Southern Europe and a plumber in the United States," Trend Micro explained.</p> <p>"Just like Pawn Storm, Sandworm is fishing with a wide net or looking to compromise assets on a larger scale."</p> <p>Cyclops Blink is widely seen as a successor to the prolific VPNFilter malware first exposed in 2018. It's designed to infect routers and other networked devices to steal data or compromise them for further attacks on other targets.</p> <p>"Based on our observation, we strongly believe that there are more targeted devices from other vendors. This malware is modular in nature and it is likely that each vendor has different modules and architectures that were thought out well by the Cyclops Blink actors," Trend Micro concluded.</p> <p>"Moreover, the purpose of this botnet is still unclear: whether it is intended to be used for DDoS attacks, espionage, or proxy networks remains to be seen. But what is evident is that Cyclops Blink is an advanced piece of malware that focuses on persistence and the ability to survive domain sinkhole attempts and the takedown of its infrastructure."</p> <p>Asus has released a security advisory addressing the threat.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Study: 1/3rd malicious logins from Nigeria
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/third-malicious-logins-nigeria/
GIST	<p>A spear-phishing study by security company Barracuda has found that a third of malicious logins into compromised accounts in 2021 came from Nigeria.</p> <p>The finding was included in the Spear Phishing: Top Threats and Trends Vol. 7 – Key findings on the latest social engineering tactics and the growing complexity of attacks report, released by the company on Wednesday.</p> <p>The report is based on Barracuda researchers' analysis of "millions of emails across thousands of businesses" between January 2021 and December 2021.</p> <p>Researchers observed: "A significant shift is underway as cyber-criminals move from volumetric to targeted attacks, from malware to social engineering, from operating as single hackers to forming organized criminal enterprises profiting from attacks that begin with a single phishing email."</p> <p>They found that 51% of social engineering attacks were phishing. Microsoft was the most impersonated brand, used in 57% of phishing attacks. Researchers found that approximately 500,000 Microsoft 365 accounts were compromised by threat actors in 2021.</p> <p>One in five organizations had an account compromised in 2021, with employees at small enterprises more than three times more likely to be attacked. An average employee of a business with fewer than 100</p>

	<p>employees will receive 350% more social engineering attacks than someone employed at a larger company.</p> <p>A large increase in the popularity of conversation hijacking attacks was observed, with the volume of attacks exploiting this vector increasing by 270% over the year.</p> <p>Researchers warned that email protection that relies on rules, policies, allow or blocklists, signatures and other types of traditional email security are no longer effective against the constantly evolving threat of socially engineered attacks because hackers can trick users into taking actions such as sharing their credentials.</p> <p>“Small businesses often have fewer resources and lack security expertise, which leaves them more vulnerable to spear-phishing attacks, and cybercriminals are taking advantage,” said Don MacLennan, senior vice president of engineering and product management and email protection at Barracuda.</p> <p>“That’s why it’s important for businesses of all sizes not to overlook investing in security, both technology and user education. The damage caused by a breach or a compromised account can be even more costly.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Anonymous leaks Russia pipeline data
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/anonymous-leak-79gb-russia-oil-pipeline-email-data/
GIST	<p>As Russia’s invasion of Ukraine continues, hacktivist groups especially those affiliated with Anonymous, are targeting key state-backed organizations in Russia almost every day. Their latest victim is Transneft, a Moscow, Russia-based state-controlled pipeline transport company. Transneft is also known as the largest oil pipeline company in the world.</p> <p>What Happened? On Thursday, March 17, 2022, Distributed Denial of Secrets (aka DDoSecrets), a non-profit whistleblower organization, announced receiving a whopping 79GB worth of emails belonging to Transneft’s research and development division called Omega.</p> <p>On Twitter, @YourAnonNews, one of the largest social media representatives of the Anonymous movement also acknowledged the hack.</p> <p>It is worth noting that originally the data was shared with DDoSecrets by Anonymous hacktivists and the organization itself is not behind the hack or leak.</p> <p>What was Leaked? According to the details shared by DDoSecrets, the email leaks contain the email accounts data of company employees. The data doesn’t just include email messages but also sensitive files such as invoices and product shipment information.</p> <p>There are image files as well that show equipment configurations and server racks. The Verge reported that some of the emails it examined to authenticate were as recent as 15th March. DDoSecrets noted that the attachments part of the leak could contain malware.</p> <p>About Transneft For your information, Transneft is a Russian state-controlled oil pipeline firm. It is the world’s largest oil pipeline company and the latest to join the list of companies blocked from dealing with US market investors as per the terms of sanctions against Russia.</p> <p>The Omega Company is its in-house R&D unit responsible for producing advanced temperature monitoring and acoustic systems for oil pipelines.</p> <p>Anonymous siding with Ukraine</p>

As you may already know Russia has come under the radar of [hacktivists](#), particularly the Anonymous collective, after the country invaded Ukrainian territories on February 24th, 2022. Since then, Russian IT infrastructure is being targeted every other day including government websites, [State-run TV channels](#), [online video streaming platforms](#), etc.

Just last week, the group [hacked Roskomnadzor](#) (aka Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media), a major Russian federal agency. The group also leaked over 360,000 files via DDoSecrets.

However, the group's most significant attack took place last week when one of its affiliates hacked over 400 surveillance cameras in Russia. The hacktivists then defaced the compromised cameras with messages against President Putin and in support of Ukraine.

[The second attack](#), which is ongoing, is being set up by Squad303, a newly formed digital army comprising Anonymous-associated programmers. In the first stage of the attack, the group sent out 7 million text messages to random Russian citizens across the country urging them to protest against the Russian attack on Ukraine.

Details of both attacks are [available here](#).

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HEADLINE	03/20 More Conti ransomware source code leaked
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/more-conti-ransomware-source-code-leaked-on-twitter-out-of-revenge/
GIST	<p>A Ukrainian security researcher has leaked newer malware source code from the Conti ransomware operation in revenge for the cybercriminals siding with Russia on the invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Conti is an elite ransomware gang run by Russian-based threat actors. With their involvement in developing numerous malware families, it is considered one of the most active cybercrime operations.</p> <p>However, after the Conti Ransomware operation sided with Russia on the invasion of Ukraine, a Ukrainian researcher named 'Conti Leaks' decided to leak data and source code belonging to the ransomware gang out of revenge.</p> <p>Last month, the researcher published almost 170,000 internal chat conversations between the Conti ransomware gang members, spanning January 21st, 2021, through February 27th, 2022. These chat messages provide detailed insight into the operation's activities and its member's involvement</p> <p>The researcher later leaked old Conti ransomware source code dated September 15th, 2020. While the code was rather old, it allowed researchers and law enforcement to analyze the malware to understand better how it works.</p> <p>More recent Conti source code released</p> <p>Today, Conti Leaks uploaded the source code for Conti version 3 to VirusTotal and posted a link on Twitter. While the archive is password-protected, the password should be easily determined from subsequent tweets.</p> <p>This source code is much newer than the previously released version, with the last modified dates being January 25th, 2021, making it over one year newer than the previously released code.</p> <p>Like the previous version, the source code leak is a Visual Studio solution that allows anyone with access to compile the ransomware locker and decryptor.</p> <p>The source code compiles without error and can be easily modified by other threat actors to use their own public keys or add new functionality.</p>

	<p>The release of ransomware source code, especially for advanced operations like Conti, can have disastrous effects on corporate networks and consumers. This is because it is very common for other threat actors to use the released source code to create their own ransomware operations.</p> <p>In the past, a researcher published the source code for a ransomware named 'Hidden Tear' that many threat actors quickly adopted to launch different operations.</p> <p>While Hidden Tear can be decrypted, it led to a scourge of new ransomware infections that terrorized consumers and companies for years.</p> <p>More recently, a threat actor leaked the source code for Babuk ransomware on a Russian-speaking hacking forum.</p> <p>Within days, other threat actors used the source code for their use, and new ransomware operations were launched, such as Rook and Pandora.</p> <p>With the continued leaks of the Conti ransomware gang's source code, it is only a matter of time until other threat actors use it to launch their own operations.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Avoslocker targets critical infrastructure
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fbi-avoslocker-ransomware-targets-us-critical-infrastructure/
GIST	<p>The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) warns of AvosLocker ransomware being used in attacks targeting multiple US critical infrastructure sectors.</p> <p>This was disclosed in a joint cybersecurity advisory published this week in coordination with the US Treasury Department and the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN).</p> <p>"AvosLocker is a Ransomware as a Service (RaaS) affiliate-based group that has targeted victims across multiple critical infrastructure sectors in the United States including, but not limited to, the Financial Services, Critical Manufacturing, and Government Facilities sectors," the FBI said [PDF].</p> <p>"As a result, AvosLocker indicators of compromise (IOCs) vary between indicators specific to AvosLocker malware and indicators specific to the individual affiliate responsible for the intrusion."</p> <p>The advisory provides network defenders with indicators of compromise (IOCs) they can use to detect and block AvosLocker ransomware attacks.</p> <p>AvosLocker first surfaced during the summer of 2021, promoting their Ransomware-as-a-Service (RaaS) operation on underground forums and calling for ransomware affiliates to join them.</p> <p>You can find more info on AvosLocker ransomware and what you need to do if you get hit by this ransomware in our forum.</p> <p>The FBI also shared technical details on this RaaS operation, including that AvosLocker representatives allegedly will also call victims to direct them to the payment site to negotiate reduced ransom payments.</p> <p>If this is true, AvosLocker would be yet another cybercrime group known for using this tactic to push them to pay the ransoms, a tactic pioneered and filed tested by the Sekhmet, Maze, Ryuk, and Conti ransomware gangs.</p>

	<p>In some cases, AvosLocker negotiators also threaten and launch distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks during negotiations, likely when the victims are not cooperating, to convince them to comply with their demands.</p> <p>Mitigation measures to help network defenders prevent AvosLocker ransomware attacks include network segmentation and regular offline backups, as well as keeping software up to date, especially Microsoft Exchange Server, a known attack vector used by AvosLocker affiliates.</p> <p>Earlier this month, the FBI also revealed that another ransomware gang tracked as Ragnar Locker has successfully breached the networks of at least 52 organizations across ten critical infrastructure sectors as of January 2022.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Code-sabotage incident protest Ukraine war
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/application-security/recent-code-sabotage-incident-latest-to-highlight-code-dependency-risks
GIST	<p>The maintainer of a widely used open source module for Windows, Linux, and Mac environments recently sabotaged its functionality to protest the war in Ukraine and in the process focused attention once again on the potentially serious security issues tied to code dependencies in software.</p> <p>Brandon Nozaki Miller, author of node-ipc, a JavaScript module for interprocess communication that millions of developers use when building software, recently inserted code into the software for deleting all files on developer systems geolocated in Russia and Belarus.</p> <p>He later quickly removed module versions containing the wiper code from the npm JavaScript registry on which it was available, but then published another module called "peacenotwar" and made it a dependency of node-ipc. So, developers that downloaded node-ipc ended up having a file with Ukraine war-related messaging placed in their desktop directory. The node-ipc module averages more than one million downloads a week, across all versions.</p> <p>Application security vendor Snyk, which investigated the incident this week, described it as an example of an act that undermines the global open source community. "This security incident involves destructive acts of corrupting files on disk by one maintainer and their attempts to hide and restate that deliberate sabotage in different forms," Snyk's director of developer advocacy Liran Tal said in a blog. "While this is an attack with protest-driven motivations, it highlights a larger issue facing the software supply chain: the transitive dependencies in your code can have a huge impact on your security."</p> <p>The node-ipc incident is the second one in recent months to highlight the serious risks that enterprises run from using open source and third-party components to build software.</p> <p>In January, Marak Squires, the maintainer of two very widely used open source libraries — colors.js and faker.js — intentionally introduced code into the modules that caused applications relying on them to print the word "liberty" multiple times followed by gibberish. Sonatype, which maintains the Maven Central Java package repository and investigated the Squires incident, described 'colors' as having more than 3.3 billion downloads and as being used in over 19,000 projects and 'faker' as having more than 272 million downloads and about 2,500 dependent projects. So, thousands of applications were impacted by Squires' action, which Sonatype surmised might have been a form of protest by Squires over what he considered as big companies and commercial projects benefiting for free from his work.</p> <p>Dangerous Meddling</p> <p>Snyk's analysis of the latest node-ipc incident showed that Miller, who uses the handle RIAEvangelist, published two node-ipc versions containing the destructive code (10.1.1 and 10.1.2) just hours apart on March 7, 2021. The corrupted modules were available for download on the npm JavaScript registry for less than 24 hours before they were removed. Even so, the high number of downloads associated with</p>

node-ipc make it certain that at least some developers that use the module in their code were impacted, Tal said in comments to Dark Reading.

"The destructive versions 10.1.1 and 10.1.2 were removed from the registry of npmjs before we [were] able to collect any download stats for them," he says. However, the 10.x version branch of node-ipc has about 3,000 downloads a week, so it is safe to assume that nearly the same amount of downloads contained the wiper code.

Miller published the peacenotwar package on NPM a day later, on March 8. He described the module as both as a protest against Russian aggression in Ukraine, and as a "non-destructive" example of why developers need to exercise more control over node modules. "[This] should serve as a safe example of why teams should use explicit dependency versions," Miller said in a [GitHub thread](#). "It is always our choice to upgrade or not."

Tal says that the peacenotwar module at first received barely tens and hundreds of downloads, but, once it was added as a dependency of the mainstream node-ipc branch, it received more than 40,000 downloads. "Keep in mind though, this module is the lesser destructive 'protestware', although still quite alarming for end users."

In a statement, Sonatype CTO Brian Fox said the recent incidents show why developers should vet the maintainers when choosing open source modules for use. He recommended that developers should almost exclusively choose code from projects backed by foundations rather than individuals. Choosing a project with just one maintainer means putting trust in one single developer, Fox said. Open source projects that are backed by a foundation tend to have controls that make it very hard for a single developer to completely alter code on their own, he noted.

"It's impossible not to look at what happened with peacenotwar and node-ipc and immediately relate it to what happened with 'colors' and 'faker' which was another act of protest," he says. "You can debate the validity of this protest, but this type of behavior absolutely contributes to trust issues apparent within open source."

Tal says that prior research has shown that nested dependencies compound significantly with every module that is added to software that is being built. He points to one study in 2019 that showed developers installing an average npm package implicitly trust 80 other packages due to transitive dependencies. "Some highly popular packages reach more than 100,000 other packages, making them a prime target for attacks," he says.

Supply chain security concerns have increased and should be top of mind for any developer, startup, or enterprise, Tal says. Security concerns range from maintainer reputation to licensing, security vulnerabilities, and maintainability of the project. "Developers should carefully review the open source component's overall health score which spans all of the aforementioned characteristics, and more."

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HEADLINE	03/18 FBI, CISA: satellite networks at-risk
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/satellite-networks-worldwide-at-risk-of-possible-cyberattacks-fbi-cisa-warn
GIST	<p>The FBI and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) are raising the alarm over known "possible threats" to US and international satellite communication (SATCOM) networks that then could spill over to their customers' networks.</p> <p>SATCOM providers and their network customers should immediately take these mitigation steps, according to the FBI and CISA: harden authentication and enforce least privilege; deploy encryption; patch software and audit system configurations; monitor logs for "suspicious activity"; and solidify incident response and business continuity plans.</p>

	"Given the current geopolitical situation, CISA's Shields Up initiative requests that all organizations significantly lower their threshold for reporting and sharing indications of malicious cyber activity. To that end, CISA and FBI will update this joint Cybersecurity Advisory (CSA) as new information becomes available so that SATCOM providers and their customers can take additional mitigation steps pertinent to their environments," the government advisory said .
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HEADLINE	03/18 South Africa credit bureau breach; ransom
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/south-africa-transunion-data-breach/
GIST	<p>One of the top credit bureaus in South Africa has suffered a data breach, and the hackers are demanding about \$15 million in ransom, according to news reports.</p> <p>The country's arm of TransUnion confirmed Thursday that "a criminal third party obtained access to a TransUnion South Africa server through misuse of an authorised client's credentials." The company said the ransom demand "will not be paid."</p> <p>South African news site ITWeb reported that a group calling itself N4ughtysecTU, which claims to be based in Brazil, is taking responsibility.</p> <p>"We are N4ughtySec Group hackers. We have hacked TransUnion South Africa since 2012," the group claimed in a Telegram chat with ITWeb. There were no details about the group's attack, although it claims TransUnion used a weak password in one part of its network.</p> <p>"We have over 4TB of all their customers' information. The information includes over 200 corporate companies," the purported cybercriminals said. "We have been in contact with TransUnion and they have been given our ransom demands. They were alerted on Friday, the 11th March 2022."</p> <p>ITWeb said the hackers are asking for bitcoin worth about 223 million in South African rand, or about \$15 million.</p> <p>Johannesburg-based TransUnion said it notified authorities and is working with cybersecurity experts to respond to the breach.</p> <p>"We believe the incident impacted an isolated server holding limited data from our South African business," TransUnion said. "We are working with law enforcement and regulators."</p> <p>The company posted a Q&A for South African consumers on its FAQ page. TransUnion provides credit bureau services in more than 30 countries.</p> <p>In 2020, the South Africa division of credit bureau Experian was breached when someone posing as a client tricked the firm into handing over information about hundreds of thousands of people. A suspect was arrested in September 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 China state hackers target Ukraine govt.
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/google-chinese-state-hackers-target-ukraine-s-government/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Google's Threat Analysis Group (TAG) says the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and other Chinese intelligence agencies are trying to get more info on the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine.</p> <p>Google TAG Security Engineer Billy Leonard says Google notified Ukrainian government organizations targeted by a Chinese-sponsored hacking group.</p>

"Over the last few weeks Google TAG has identified a govt backed actor from CN targeting Ukrainian govt orgs, and we provided notifications to impacted parties," Leonard [said](#).

"While our priority is providing notifications to impacted parties, we've provided related IOCs to community partners, and we will publish more details for the security community in the near future."

The group's head, Shane Huntley, also confirmed Leonard's assessment, saying that "the Ukraine war isn't only attracting interest from European threat actors. China is working hard here too."

This aligns with claims made by the Intrusion Truth, a secretive group known for its work on exposing suspected Chinese hacking operations, on Tuesday saying that it's aware of Chinese threat actors targeting Ukraine, likely at the behest of the Chinese government.

Intrusion Truth also asked infosec experts to share any indicators or samples linked to Chinese malicious activity in Ukraine via public or anonymous channels.

Chinese state hackers also targeting Europe

Google TAG's report of ongoing Chinese cyber operations in Ukraine follows another warning issued one week ago regarding a Chinese-backed hacking group tracked as APT31 [targeting Gmail users affiliated with the US government](#).

One day earlier, Google security analysts revealed that Russian and Belarusian [targeted Ukrainian and European government and military orgs](#) in widespread phishing and DDoS attacks.

"In the last 12 months, TAG has issued hundreds of government-backed attack warnings to Ukrainian users alerting them that they have been the target of government-backed hacking, largely emanating from Russia," [said](#) Shane Huntley, Google's TAG lead.

Google added that the Chinese-backed hacking group Mustang Panda (aka Temp.Hex and TA416) has also switched to phishing attacks against European organizations using lures related to the invasion of Ukraine.

The same day, Proofpoint revealed it detected [Mustang Panda phishing](#) "European diplomatic entities, including an individual involved in refugee and migrant services."

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HEADLINE	03/18 Hackers hit Mass. background-check firm
SOURCE	https://www.databreaches.net/hackers-hit-mass-background-check-firm-used-by-state-agencies-universities/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Computer hackers made off with highly sensitive personal records on more than 164,000 job-seekers and license applicants in a virtual "smash and grab" attack last November on Creative Services Inc., a Massachusetts company that conducts background checks on everyone from marijuana entrepreneurs to state employees, university faculty members, and workers at nuclear facilities.</p> <p>The Mansfield firm said its security team was still investigating the motive and identity of the hackers behind the incident, which executives only disclosed in regulatory filings and letters to clients in February.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 NRA confirms 2021 cyberattack
SOURCE	https://gizmodo.com/nra-confirms-hack-by-ransomware-gang-grief-1848673536?&web_view=true
GIST	The National Rifle Association, defender of gun-loving maniacs everywhere, has confirmed that it did, in fact, get hacked by cybercriminals last year.

On Friday, the organization’s political action committee (PAC) submitted a [filing](#) to the Federal Election Commission confirming the attack. The PAC made the filing to the FEC in an effort to explain a recent financial discrepancy—it had failed to report thousands of dollars in donations to the government.

A ransomware gang calling itself “Grief” [bragged](#) to the digital underworld last October about compromising the gun lobby’s servers and stealing sensitive internal documents. It leaked screenshots of what it claimed were documents that had been stolen during the incident. At the time, the NRA did not confirm or deny that it had been hacked, issuing an [evasive statement](#) about how it “does not discuss matters related to physical or electronic security.” Now, however, the NRA has admitted that it got pwned. The hackers were telling the truth.

According to the filing, the ransomware attack hit the NRA on October 20, 2021, taking the entire organization offline. NRA employees did not regain full access to the internet, their email inboxes, or their networked files until the second week of November. Grief leaked additional documents that month, including bank account numbers and other “sensitive personal and financial information,” seemingly still waiting for the NRA to pay up.

The weapons promoter blames the confirmed cyberattack for the fact that it failed to report a slew of credit card contributions it received the same month as the incident. According to the filing, some \$2,485.66 in contributions weren’t “processed correctly” into its donor base due to the fact that its network had been blitzed. The allegedly extremely [corrupt](#) organization has been accused of [abusing the bankruptcy process](#) to evade legal action, and the New York attorney general has sued to dissolve it entirely for alleged financial misconduct.

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HEADLINE	03/18 Latecomer’s guide to crypto
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/18/technology/cryptocurrency-crypto-guide.html?action=click&module=Well&pqtype=Homepage&section=Technology
GIST	<p>Until fairly recently, if you lived anywhere other than San Francisco, it was possible to go days or even weeks without hearing about cryptocurrency.</p> <p>Now, suddenly, it’s inescapable. Look one way, and there are Matt Damon and Larry David doing ads for crypto start-ups. Swivel your head — oh, hey, it’s the mayors of Miami and New York City, arguing over who loves Bitcoin more. Two N.B.A. arenas are now named after crypto companies, and it seems as if every corporate marketing team in America has jumped on the NFT — or nonfungible token — bandwagon. (Can I interest you in one of Pepsi’s new “Mic Drop” genesis NFTs? Or maybe something from Applebee’s “Metaverse Meals” NFT collection, inspired by the restaurant chain’s “iconic” menu items?)</p> <p>Crypto! For years, it seemed like the kind of fleeting tech trend most people could safely ignore, like hoverboards or Google Glass. But its power, both economic and cultural, has become too big to overlook. Twenty percent of American adults, and 36 percent of millennials, own cryptocurrency, according to a recent Morning Consult survey. Coinbase, the crypto trading app, has landed on top of the App Store’s top charts at least twice in the past year. Today, the crypto market is valued at around \$1.75 trillion — roughly the size of Google. And in Silicon Valley, engineers and executives are bolting from cushy jobs in droves to join the crypto gold rush.</p> <p>As it’s gone mainstream, crypto has inspired an unusually polarized discourse. Its biggest fans think it’s saving the world, while its biggest skeptics are convinced it’s all a scam — an environment-killing speculative bubble orchestrated by grifters and sold to greedy dupes, which will probably crash the economy when it bursts.</p> <p>I’ve been writing about crypto for nearly a decade, a period in which my own views have whipsawed between extreme skepticism and cautious optimism. These days, I usually describe myself as a crypto moderate, although I admit that may be a cop-out.</p>

I agree with the skeptics that much of the crypto market consists of overvalued, overhyped and possibly fraudulent assets, and I am unmoved by the most utopian sentiments shared by pro-crypto zealots (such as the claim by Jack Dorsey, the former Twitter chief, that Bitcoin will [usher in world peace](#)).

But as I've experimented more with crypto — including accidentally [selling an NFT for more than \\$500,000](#) in a charity auction last year — I've come to accept that it isn't all a cynical money-grab, and that there are things of actual substance being built. I've also learned, in my career as a tech journalist, that when so much money, energy and talent flows toward a new thing, it's generally a good idea to pay attention, regardless of your views on the thing itself.

My strongest-held belief about crypto, though, is that it is terribly explained.

Recently, I spent several months reading everything I could about crypto. But I found that most beginner's guides took the form of boring podcasts, thinly researched YouTube videos and blog posts written by hopelessly biased investors. Many anti-crypto takes, on the other hand, were undercut by inaccuracies and outdated arguments, such as the assertion that crypto is good for criminals, notwithstanding the [growing evidence](#) that crypto's traceable ledgers make it a poor fit for illicit activity.

What I couldn't find was a sober, dispassionate explanation of what crypto actually *is* — how it works, who it's for, what's at stake, where the battle lines are drawn — along with answers to some of the most common questions it raises.

This guide — a mega-F.A.Q., really — is an attempt to fix that. In it, I'll explain the basic concepts as clearly as I can, doing my best to answer the questions a curious but open-minded skeptic might pose.

Crypto boosters will likely quibble with my explanations, while dug-in opponents may find them too generous. That's OK. My goal is not to convince you that crypto is good or bad, that it should be outlawed or celebrated, or that investing in it will make you rich or bankrupt you. It is simply to demystify things a bit. And if you want to go deeper, each section has a list of reading suggestions at the end.

CRYPTO WILL BE TRANSFORMATIVE

Understanding crypto now — especially if you're naturally skeptical — is important for a few reasons. The first is that crypto wealth and ideology is going to be a transformative force in our society in the coming years.

You've heard about the overnight [Dogecoin millionaires](#) and [Lamborghini-driving Bitcoin bros](#). But that's not the half of it. The crypto boom has generated vast new fortunes at a clip we've never seen before — the closest comparison is probably the discovery of oil in the Middle East — and has turned its [biggest winners](#) into some of the richest people in the world, essentially overnight. Some riches could vanish if the market crashes, but enough has already been cashed out to ensure that crypto's influence will linger for decades.

Crypto's madcap, meme-crazed online culture can make it seem frivolous and shallow. It's not. Cryptocurrencies, even the jokey ones, are part of a robust, well-funded ideological movement that has serious implications for our political and economic future. Bitcoin, which emerged out of the ashes of the 2008 financial crisis, first caught on among libertarians and anti-establishment activists who saw it as the cornerstone of a new, incorruptible monetary system. Since then, other crypto realms have fashioned similarly lofty goals, like building a decentralized, largely unregulated version of Wall Street on the blockchain.

We are already starting to see a swell of crypto money headed toward the U.S. political system. Crypto entrepreneurs are [donating millions of dollars to candidates](#) and causes, and lobbying firms have [fanned out](#) across the country to win support for pro-crypto legislation. In the coming years, crypto moguls will

bankroll the campaigns of crypto-friendly candidates, or run for office themselves. Some will peddle influence in the familiar ways — forming super PACs, funding think tanks, etc. — while others will try to escape partisan gridlock altogether. (Crypto millionaires are already [buying up land in the South Pacific](#) to build their own blockchain utopias.)

Crypto is poised to soon become one of a handful of true wedge issues, with politicians all over the world forced to pick a side. Some countries, like El Salvador — whose crypto-loving president, Nayib Bukele, recently [announced](#) the development of a “Bitcoin City” at the base of a volcano — will go full crypto. Other governments may decide that crypto is a threat to their sovereignty and crack down, as China did when it [outlawed cryptocurrency trading](#) last year. The divide between the world’s pro-crypto and no-crypto zones could end up being at least as big as the divide between the Chinese internet and the American one, and maybe even more consequential.

In America, we have already seen how crypto can scramble the usual partisan allegiances. Former President Donald J. Trump and Senator Elizabeth Warren, the Democrat from Massachusetts, are united in crypto skepticism, for example, while Senator Ted Cruz, Republican from Texas, is in the same bullish camp as Senator Ron Wyden, the Democrat from Oregon. We have also seen what can happen when the crypto community feels politically threatened, as happened last summer, when crypto groups [rallied to oppose a crypto-related provision](#) in President Biden’s infrastructure bill.

What I’m saying, I guess, is that despite the goofy veneer, crypto is not just another weird internet phenomenon. It’s an organized technological movement, armed with powerful tools and hordes of wealthy true believers, whose goal is nothing less than a total economic and political revolution.

CRYPTO COULD BE DESTRUCTIVE

The second reason to pay attention to crypto is that understanding it now is the best way to ensure it doesn’t become a destructive force later.

In the early 2010s, the most common knock on social media apps like Facebook and Twitter was that they just wouldn’t work as businesses. Pundits predicted that users would eventually tire of their friends’ vacation photos, that advertisers would flee and that the whole social media industry would collapse. The theory wasn’t so much that social media was dangerous or bad; just that it was boring and corny, a hype-driven fad that would disappear as quickly as it had arrived.

What nobody was asking back then — at least not loudly — were questions like: What if social media is actually *insanely successful*? What kind of regulations would need to exist in a world where Facebook and Twitter were the dominant communication platforms? How should tech companies with billions of users weigh the trade-offs between free speech and safety? What product features could prevent online hate and misinformation from cascading into offline violence?

By the middle of the decade, when it was clear that these were urgent questions, it was too late. The platform mechanics and ad-based business models were already baked in, and skeptics — who might have steered these apps in a better direction, if they’d taken them more seriously from the start — were stuck trying to contain the damage.

Are we making the same mistake with crypto today? It’s possible. No one knows yet whether crypto will or won’t “work,” in the grandest sense. (Anyone who claims they do is selling something.) But there is real money and energy in it, and many tech veterans I’ve spoken to tell me that today’s crypto scene feels, to them, like 2010 all over again — with tech disrupting money this time, instead of media. If they’re wrong, they’re wrong. But if they’re right — even partly — the best time to start paying attention is now, before the paths are set and the problems are intractable.

The third reason to study up on crypto is that it can be genuinely fun to learn about.

Sure, a lot of it is dumb, shady or self-refuting. But if you can look past the carnival barkers and parse the convoluted jargon, you’ll find a bottomless well of weird, interesting and thought-provoking

projects. The crypto agenda is so huge and multidisciplinary — drawing together elements of economics, engineering, philosophy, law, art, energy policy and more — that it offers lots of footholds for beginners. Want to discuss the influence of Austrian economics in Bitcoin development? There's probably a Discord server for that. Want to join a [DAO](#) that invests in NFTs, or play a video game that pays you in crypto tokens for winning? Dive right in.

CRYPTO IS A GENERATIONAL SKELETON KEY

Mind you, I am not suggesting that the crypto world is diverse, in the demographic sense. Surveys have suggested that [high-earning white men](#) make up a large share of crypto owners, and libertarians with dog-eared copies of “Atlas Shrugged” are likely overrepresented among crypto millionaires. But it's not an intellectual monolith. There are right-wing Bitcoin maximalists who believe that crypto will liberate them from government tyranny; left-wing Ethereum fans who want to overthrow the big banks; and speculators with no ideological attachments who just want to turn a profit and get out. These communities fight with one another constantly, and many have wildly different ideas about what crypto should be. It makes for fascinating study, especially with a bit of emotional distance.

And if you do learn some crypto basics, you might find that a whole world opens up to you. You'll understand why Jimmy Fallon and Steph Curry are changing their Twitter avatars to cartoon apes, and why Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, spent a decent chunk of last year tweeting about a digital currency named after a dog. Strange words and phrases you encounter on the internet — rug pulls, flippenings, “gm” — will become familiar, and eventually, headlines like [“NFT Collector Sells People's Fursonas for \\$100K In Right-Click Mindset War”](#) won't make you wonder if you're losing your grip on reality.

Crypto can also be a kind of generational skeleton key — maybe the single fastest way to freshen your cultural awareness and decipher the beliefs and actions of today's young people. And just as knowing a little about New Age mysticism and psychedelics would help someone trying to make sense of youth culture in the 1960s, knowing some crypto basics can help someone perplexed by emerging attitudes about money and power feel more grounded.

Again, I don't really care whether you emerge from these explainers as a true believer, a devoted skeptic or something in between. Participate or abstain as you wish! All I'm after is understanding — and possibly, a little relief from the question that has consumed my social and professional life for the past several years:

“So ... can I ask you a question about crypto?”

Let's start from the beginning: What is crypto?

A decade or two ago, the word was generally used as shorthand for cryptography. But in recent years, it's been more closely associated with cryptocurrencies. These days, “crypto” usually refers to the entire universe of technologies that involve blockchains — the distributed ledger systems that power digital currencies like Bitcoin, but also serve as the base layer of technology for things like NFTs, web3 applications and DeFi trading protocols.

Ah yes, blockchains. Can you remind me, without going into too much technical detail, what they are?

At a very basic level, [blockchains](#) are shared databases that store and verify information in a cryptographically secure way.

You can think of a blockchain like a Google spreadsheet, except that instead of being hosted on Google's servers, blockchains are maintained by a network of computers all over the world. These computers (sometimes called miners or validators) are responsible for storing their own copies of the database, adding and verifying new entries, and securing the database against hackers.

So blockchains are ... fancy Google spreadsheets?

Sort of! But there are at least three important conceptual differences.

First, a blockchain is decentralized. It doesn't need a company like Google overseeing it. All of that work is done by the computers on the network, using what's called a consensus mechanism — basically, a complicated algorithm that allows them to agree on what's in a database without the need for a neutral referee. This makes blockchains more secure than traditional record-keeping systems, proponents believe, since no single person or company can take down the blockchain or alter its contents, and anyone trying to hack or change the records in the ledger would need to break into many computers simultaneously.

The second major feature of blockchains is that they're typically public and open source, meaning that unlike a Google spreadsheet, anyone can inspect a public blockchain's code or see a record of any transaction. (There are private blockchains, but they're less important than the public ones.)

Third, blockchains are typically append-only and permanent, meaning that unlike with a Google spreadsheet, data that's added to a blockchain typically can't be deleted or changed after the fact.

Got it. So blockchains are public, permanent databases that nobody owns?

You're getting it!

Now remind me: How are blockchains related to cryptocurrencies?

Blockchains didn't really exist until 2009, when a pseudonymous programmer named Satoshi Nakamoto released the technical documentation for Bitcoin, the first-ever cryptocurrency.

Bitcoin used a blockchain to keep track of transactions. That was notable because, for the first time, it allowed people to send and receive money over the internet without needing to involve a central authority, such as a bank or an app like PayPal or Venmo.

Many blockchains still perform cryptocurrency transactions, and there are now roughly 10,000 different cryptocurrencies in existence, according to CoinMarketCap. But many blockchains can be used to store other kinds of information, too — including NFTs, bits of self-executing code known as smart contracts and full-fledged apps — without the need for a central authority.

OK, but can we back up a second? Weren't tech people telling us, years ago, that crypto was a new and exciting form of money? And yet, nobody I know pays their rent or buys groceries in Bitcoin. So were those people just ... wrong?

Good question. It's true that today, hardly anyone pays for things in cryptocurrency. In part, that's because most merchants still don't accept crypto payments, and hefty transaction fees can make it impractical to spend small amounts of cryptocurrency on daily living expenses. It's also because the value of popular cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ether has historically gone up, making it somewhat risky to use them for offline purchases. (The counterexamples are usually cited with pity, like the [guy](#) who, in 2010, bought two Papa John's pizzas using Bitcoin that was worth about \$40 at the time, but would be worth roughly \$400 million today.)

It's also true that the value of cryptocurrencies has grown enormously since the early Bitcoin days, despite them *not* being most people's daily spending money.

Part of that growth is speculation — people buying crypto assets in hopes of selling them for more later on. Part of it is because the blockchains that have emerged since Bitcoin, like Ethereum and Solana, have expanded what can be done with this technology.

And some crypto fans believe that the prices of cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin will eventually stabilize, which could make them more useful as a means of payment.

What are the actual uses of crypto, beyond financial speculation?

Right now, many of the successful applications for crypto technology are in finance or finance-adjacent fields. For example, people are using crypto to [send cross-border remittances](#) to family members abroad and Wall Street banks [using blockchains](#) to settle foreign transactions.

The crypto boom has also led to an explosion of experiments outside of financial services. There are [crypto social clubs](#), [crypto video games](#), [crypto restaurants](#) and even [crypto-powered wireless networks](#).

These non-financial uses are still fairly limited. But crypto fans often make the case that the technology is still young, and that it took the internet decades to mature into what it is today. Investors are pouring billions of dollars into crypto start-ups because they think that someday, blockchains will be used for all kinds of things: storing medical records, tracking streaming music rights, even hosting new social media platforms. And the crypto ecosystem is [attracting tons of developers](#) — an auspicious sign for any new technology.

I've heard people calling crypto a pyramid scheme or a Ponzi scheme. What do they mean?

Some critics believe that cryptocurrency markets are fundamentally fraudulent, either because early investors get rich at the expense of late investors (a pyramid scheme), or because crypto projects lure in unsuspecting investors with promises of safe returns, then collapse once new money stops coming in (a Ponzi scheme).

There are certainly plenty of examples of pyramid and Ponzi schemes *within* crypto. They include OneCoin, a [fraudulent crypto operation](#) that stole \$4 billion from investors from 2014 to 2019; and Virgil Sigma Fund, a \$90 million crypto hedge fund run by a 24-year-old investor who [pleaded guilty to securities fraud](#) and was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison.

But these cases aren't usually what critics are talking about. They're generally arguing that crypto *itself* is an exploitative scheme, with no real-world value.

And are they right?

Well, let's try to understand the case they're making.

Unlike buying stock in, say, Apple, a purchase that (theoretically, at least) reflects a belief that Apple's underlying business is healthy, buying a cryptocurrency is more like betting on the success of an idea, they say. If people believe in Bitcoin, they buy, and Bitcoin prices go up. If people stop believing in Bitcoin, they sell, and Bitcoin prices go down.

Crypto owners, then, have a rational incentive to convince other people to buy. And if you don't think that cryptocurrency technology is inherently valuable, you might conclude that the entire thing resembles a pyramid scheme, in which you primarily make money by recruiting others to join.

I'm sensing a "but" coming on.

But! Even though there are scams and frauds within crypto, and crypto investors are certainly fond of trying to recruit other people to buy in, many investors will tell you that they are going in with their eyes wide open.

They believe that crypto technology is inherently valuable, and that the ability to store information and value on a decentralized blockchain will be attractive to all kinds of people and businesses in the future. They would tell you they're betting on crypto the product, not crypto the idea — which, on some level, isn't all that different from buying Apple stock because you think the next iPhone is going to be popular.

Matt Huang, a prominent investor, spoke for many crypto fans when [he said on Twitter](#): "Crypto may look like a speculative casino from the outside. But that distracts many from the deeper truth: the casino is a trojan horse with a new financial system hidden inside."

You can argue with that position, or dispute how much this “new financial system” is actually worth. But crypto investors clearly believe it’s worth *something*.

Is crypto regulated?

Only slightly. In the United States, certain centralized crypto exchanges, such as Coinbase, are required to register as money transmitters and follow laws like the Bank Secrecy Act, which requires them to collect certain information about their customers. Some countries have passed more stringent regulations, and others, like China, have [banned](#) cryptocurrency trading entirely.

But compared with the traditional financial system, crypto is very lightly regulated. There are few rules governing crypto assets like “stablecoins” — coins whose value is pegged to government-backed currencies — or even clear guidance from the Internal Revenue Service about how certain crypto investments should be taxed. And certain areas of crypto, like [DeFi](#) (decentralized finance), are almost completely unregulated.

Partly, that’s because it’s still early, and making new rules takes time. But it’s also a property of blockchain technology itself, much of which was designed to be hard for governments to control.

This question comes from the (apparently crypto-curious) rapper [Cardi B](#): Is crypto going to replace the dollar?

Sorry, Cardi. The dollar is the world’s reserve currency, and dislodging it would be a huge, costly project that isn’t likely to happen any time soon. (To give just one small example of the enormity of the task: every financial contract that is denominated in dollars would have to be re-denominated in Bitcoin or Ether or some other cryptocurrency.)

There are also technical hurdles crypto needs to overcome if it’s ever going to displace government-issued currency. Today, the most popular blockchains — Bitcoin and Ethereum — are slow and inefficient compared with traditional payment networks. (The Ethereum blockchain, for example, can process only about [15 transactions per second](#), whereas Visa says it can process thousands of credit card transactions per second.)

And, of course, for a cryptocurrency like Bitcoin to replace the dollar, you’d need to convince billions of people to use a currency whose value fluctuates wildly, that isn’t backed by a government and that often can’t be retrieved if it’s stolen.

What kind of people are investing in crypto? Is it all — to quote a recent “Curb Your Enthusiasm” episode — “nerds and Nazis”?

It’s hard to say who’s investing in crypto, especially since a lot of activity takes place anonymously or under pseudonyms. But some [surveys](#) and studies have suggested that crypto is still dominated by affluent white men.

Gemini, a cryptocurrency exchange, estimated in a [recent report](#) that women made up only 26 percent of crypto investors. The average crypto owner, the group found, was a 38-year-old man making approximately \$111,000 a year.

But crypto ownership does appear to be diversifying. A 2021 [Pew Research Center survey](#) found that Asian, Black and Latino adults were more likely to have used crypto than white adults. Crypto adoption is also growing outside the United States, and some [studies](#) have suggested that crypto adoption is growing fastest in countries like Vietnam, India and Pakistan.

My colleague, Tressie McMillan Cottom, has [made the case](#) that crypto — because it relies on permanent, irrefutable records of ownership of digital goods and currencies — is particularly attractive to people from marginalized groups, who may have had their property unjustly taken from them in the past.

“If I live in a community where the police absolutely use eminent domain to claim my private property and I cannot do anything about it,” she wrote, “that sense of everyday powerlessness would make the promise of blockchain sound pretty good.”

That said, some recent studies have also found that a [small number of people own the vast majority of crypto wealth](#) — so it’s not necessarily an egalitarian paradise.

And what about extremists? Are they into crypto?

Some are. Because you can buy and sell cryptocurrency without using your name or having a bank account, crypto in its early days was a natural fit for people who had reasons to avoid the traditional financial system. They included criminals, tax evaders and people buying and selling illicit goods. They also included political dissidents and extremists, some of whom had been kicked off more mainstream payment services like PayPal and Patreon.

As a result of their well-timed entry into the crypto market, some extremists have gotten rich. A recent [investigation](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that several prominent white supremacists have made hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars by investing in crypto.

Of course, there are millions of crypto owners, the vast majority of whom are not white supremacists. And the same properties of anonymity and censorship-resistance that make crypto useful to white supremacists might also make it attractive to, say, [Afghan citizens fleeing the Taliban](#). So labeling the entire crypto movement an extremist group would be overkill. Regardless, it’s safe to say that crypto has become attractive to all kinds of people who would rather not deal (or can’t legally deal) with a traditional bank.

Another criticism I’ve heard is that crypto is bad for the environment. Is that true?

This is a [real can of worms](#) — and one of the most frequent objections to crypto.

Let’s start with what we know for sure. It’s true that most crypto activity today takes place on blockchains that require large amounts of energy to store and verify transactions. These networks use a “proof-of-work” consensus mechanism — a process that has been compared to a global guessing game, played by computers all competing to solve cryptographic puzzles in order to add new information to the database and earn a reward in return. Solving these puzzles requires powerful computers, which in turn use lots of energy.

The Bitcoin blockchain, for example, uses an estimated 200 terawatt-hours of energy per year, according to Digiconomist, a website that [tracks crypto energy usage](#). That’s comparable to the annual energy consumption of Thailand. And Bitcoin’s associated carbon emissions have been estimated at roughly 100 megatons per year, which is comparable to the carbon footprint of the Czech Republic.

Holy moly! How do crypto fans justify that kind of environmental impact?

Crypto advocates often [quibble with these statistics](#). They also argue that:

- Our existing financial system also uses a lot of energy, between powering millions of bank branches, A.T.M.s that sit idle for most of the day, gold mines and other energy-intensive infrastructure.
- Many crypto-mining computers are already powered by renewable energy sources, or by energy that would otherwise be wasted.
- Most newer blockchains are built using consensus mechanisms that require much less energy than proof-of-work. (Ethereum, for example, is scheduled to switch to a new type of consensus mechanism called proof-of-stake sometime in 2022, which could reduce its energy usage by as much as 99.5 percent.)

And are those arguments valid?

Partly. It’s true that most newer blockchains are designed in a way that requires considerably less energy than Bitcoin, and that Ethereum’s switch to a proof-of-stake consensus mechanism will greatly shrink its environmental footprint, if and when it happens.

But it's also a bit convenient to steer attention away from Bitcoin, which is still the most valuable cryptocurrency in the world. Bitcoin's energy needs aren't expected to fall significantly anytime soon. And even if every Bitcoin miner ran entirely on renewable energy — which, to be clear, isn't the case — there would still be an environmental cost associated with maintaining the blockchain.

All told, it's clear that crypto as we know it today has a significant environmental impact, but it's hard to measure exactly how significant. Many frequently cited statistics come from industry groups, and it's hard to find trustworthy, independent data and analysis.

But few crypto fans would dispute that blockchains consume substantially more energy than a traditional, centralized database would — just as 100 refrigerators use more energy than one refrigerator. They just argue that crypto's environmental impact will shrink over time, and that the benefits of decentralization are worth the costs.

Got it. And those benefits, again, are ...

Some crypto proponents will tell you that the biggest benefit of decentralization is the ability to create currencies, apps and virtual economies that are resistant to censorship and top-down control. (Imagine a version of Facebook, they'll say, in which Mark Zuckerberg couldn't unilaterally decide to kick people off.)

Others will say that the biggest perk of decentralization is that it allows artists and creators to control their own economic destinies more directly by giving them a way (in the form of NFTs and other crypto assets) to bypass platform gatekeepers like YouTube and Spotify, and sell unique digital works directly to their fans.

Still others will say that crypto is most useful to people who don't live in countries with stable currencies, or to dissident groups living under authoritarian regimes.

There are a million other hypothetical benefits of decentralization and crypto, some of which are realistic and some of which probably aren't.

How do you actually use crypto? Is it like sending a payment over Paypal or Venmo?

It can be. The quickest way to get started using cryptocurrencies is to set up an account with a crypto exchange like Coinbase, which can link to your bank account and convert your U.S. dollars (or other government-issued currency) into cryptocurrency.

But many crypto users prefer setting up their own “wallets” — secure places to store the cryptographic keys that unlock their digital assets.

Once you've got some crypto in your wallet, the process can be pretty simple — just type in the recipient's crypto wallet address, pay a transaction fee (if applicable), and wait for the payment to clear. Other types of crypto transactions, like buying and selling NFTs, can be significantly more complicated, but the basic act of sending a payment to someone typically takes only a few minutes.

I'm ready to dive into the rest of your explainers. But first, I have one final question about crypto's culture: Why is it so weird and insular?

This is maybe the question I get asked most about crypto. People see their friends, co-workers and relatives diving down the crypto rabbit hole and emerging days or weeks later with a new obsession, new internet friends, a bunch of new jargon and the seeming inability to talk about anything else.

(There's even a word for this — getting “cryptopilled.”) People who believe in crypto tend to *really* believe in it — to the point that they can appear to the outside world more like evangelists for a new religion than fans of a new technology.

I was a religion reporter once, and I don't think the comparison is totally inapt. (It's also not necessarily a bad thing: Plenty of people find meaning and community and intellectual stimulation in religion.) As

people like the Bloomberg journalist [Joe Weisenthal have pointed out](#), crypto has similar elements to an emerging religion: an enigmatic founder (the still-anonymous Satoshi Nakamoto), sacred texts (the [Bitcoin white paper](#)) and rituals and rites to mark yourself as a believer, such as tweeting “gm” (crypto speak for “good morning”) to your fellow believers, or photoshopping [laser eyes](#) onto your profile picture.

It’s fun to laugh at the (often [cringeworthy](#)) ways crypto fans try to entertain and inspire each other. But focusing too much on their behavior and customs might mean missing what’s genuinely novel — and, depending on where you sit, either exciting or dangerous — about the technology itself. Which is why, when my friends ask me how to talk to their cryptopilled relatives, I advise them to start by trying to understand what’s gotten them so excited in the first place.

Go deeper:

“[WTF Is the Blockchain?](#)” In this basic explainer of blockchain technology, Mohit Mamoria looks into how blockchains work and the problems they’re intended to solve.

“[Introduction to Blockchain and Money](#)” This YouTube video, which explains the history and technical underpinnings of crypto, is the first lecture in a course taught at M.I.T. in 2018 by Gary Gensler, who is now the chief of the Securities and Exchange Commission. (The rest of the course is also on YouTube, and makes for interesting viewing.)

“[A Normie’s Guide to Becoming a Crypto Person](#)” This New York Magazine article by Sara Harrison is a 101-level guide to crypto culture, including a glossary of terms and explanations of the many crypto subcommunities.

“[Digital Gold](#)” Nathaniel Popper, my former Times colleague, offers a deep dive into the history of Bitcoin and the origins of the crypto economy in his 2015 book.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Brazil lifts Telegram ban after 2 days
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/americas/brazil-telegram-bolsonaro.html
GIST	<p>RIO DE JANEIRO — Brazil’s Congress, Supreme Court, election officials and federal police have been trying to get a response from Telegram, the fast-growing messaging app, for months. It turned out, all they had to do was ban it.</p> <p>On Friday, Brazil’s Supreme Court blocked Telegram in the country because the company behind the app had been ignoring the court’s orders.</p> <p>Then, suddenly, Telegram’s chief executive responded — with a pedestrian excuse: his company had missed the court’s emails. “I apologize to the Brazilian Supreme Court for our negligence,” said the executive, Pavel Durov.</p> <p>Telegram worked quickly over the weekend to comply with the court’s orders, including by deleting classified information shared by the account of President Jair Bolsonaro and removing the accounts of a prominent supporter of Mr. Bolsonaro who has been accused of spreading misinformation.</p> <p>That action satisfied the court. Late Sunday, the court lifted its ban on Telegram.</p> <p>But Telegram also went further in a bid to avoid a ban. The app made several other changes in Brazil to combat misinformation on its app, which has worried Brazilian officials ahead of the presidential elections in October. Telegram said that among the changes, it would start promoting verified information in Brazil and marking false posts as inaccurate, while also having employees monitor the 100 most popular channels in Brazil, which account for 95 percent of the views of public posts in the country.</p>

“The app has always been willing to collaborate with the authorities. What happened was a misunderstanding regarding communication,” said Alan Thomaz, Telegram’s lawyer in Brazil, who was appointed on Sunday as part of Telegram’s response to the court.

The court’s reversal was so swift that the ban never took effect. While the court’s order was law for two days, the ban had given internet providers, wireless companies, and Apple and Google five days to comply.

The ban was instituted and lifted by Alexandre de Moraes, a Supreme Court judge who has emerged as a prominent opponent of Mr. Bolsonaro. He is overseeing several investigations into the president and his allies. Mr. Bolsonaro criticized the ban, calling it “unacceptable,” and his administration quickly challenged it in court.

Telegram has long maintained [a hands-off approach](#) to content on its apps, which has made it [popular with right-wing users](#) who complain that their views are censored on more mainstream social networks. That has meant Telegram has become an important broadcast channel for Mr. Bolsonaro, who has amassed nearly 1.1 million followers on the app. His top competitor in the 2020 presidential race, former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has less than 50,000.

Brazil is an important market for Telegram, and losing access to the country would have been a major blow to a company that has been [surging in popularity](#). Since 2014, Telegram has been downloaded nearly 85 million times in Brazil, with 29 percent of those installations coming last year, according to Sensor Tower, an app data firm.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	03/20 US \$5M bounty key Al-Shabaab operative
SOURCE	https://allafrica.com/stories/202203210030.html
GIST	<p>Nairobi — The United States government has issued a bounty of up to USD5 million for information on the whereabouts of Jihad Serwan Mostafa, alias Ahmed Gurey, believed be a high-ranking member of the Somalia-based militant group Al-Shabaab.</p> <p>The reward notice was issued under the State Department Rewards for Justice Program who said in a statement that Mostafa, a U.S. citizen and former resident of California, has held leadership positions with the Al-Qaeda linked jihadist group responsible for attacks in East African countries including Kenya and Somalia.</p> <p>The US government said that Mostafa, 41 who is on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists List, lived and graduated from college in San Diego, California, before moving to Somalia in 2005.</p> <p>It is believed he participated in attacks against Ethiopian forces before joining al-Shabaab in approximately 2008.</p> <p>"With al-Shabaab, Mostafa has functioned in many critical capacities, including serving as a military instructor at the group's training camps, leading foreign fighters, operating in the group's media wing, acting as an intermediary between al-Shabaab and other terrorist organizations, and leading the group's use of explosives in terrorist attacks," The US State Department Rewards for Justice said Sunday.</p> <p>He is also believed to continue to play a critical role in planning operations directed against the Somali government and internationally-supported African Union forces in Somalia and East Africa.</p> <p>"As a result, Mostafa continues to pose a direct threat to U.S. forces, civilians, and interests," the State Department said.</p>

	<p>On October 9, 2009, Mostafa was indicted in the Southern District of California on charges of conspiring to provide material support to terrorists, conspiring to provide material support to al-Shabaab, and providing material support to al-Shabaab according to the State Department.</p> <p>On December 2, 2019, a superseding indictment unsealed in U.S. federal court charged Mostafa with terrorism-related offenses.</p> <p>In November last year, The US government issued a bounty of up to 6 million dollars for information on the whereabouts of four other key leaders linked to the Al-Shabaab terrorist group.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Afghanistan militant groups evolving
SOURCE	https://www.voanews.com/a/how-afghanistan-s-militant-groups-are-evolving-under-taliban-rule/6492194.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Intelligence agencies worldwide are warning that Taliban rule in Afghanistan is radically reshaping terrorist and militant groups in South Asia and around the world.</p> <p>Specifically, intelligence and counterterrorism officials say that despite Taliban promises to sever ties with al-Qaida and oppose terror groups such as the Islamic State's Afghan affiliate, as codified in the 2020 Doha agreement with the United States, there has been scant evidence of progress.</p> <p>"The Taliban is attempting to maintain pressure on ISIS [Islamic State group]," the top general at U.S. Central Command told lawmakers in Washington on March 15. "They're finding it difficult to do."</p> <p>"They're much less firm on the al-Qaida issue, in terms of opposing them and trying to limit them," CENTCOM's General Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie added.</p> <p>A recent United Nations report based on member state intelligence echoed those fears.</p> <p>"There are no recent signs that the Taliban has taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country," the report said. "On the contrary, terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than at any time in recent history."</p> <p>Despite such concerns, some diplomats, such as the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, have expressed hope the Taliban will crack down.</p> <p>Thomas West told the U.S. Institute of Peace on Feb. 15 that he believed the Taliban were "very sincere in their intent to contain" Islamic State terrorists.</p> <p>Here is a look at the Taliban and the major terrorist organizations now operating in Afghanistan, and how they have fared in the six months since U.S. and coalition forces left the country.</p> <p>Taliban</p> <p>Since its emergence in 1994, the Taliban movement, which calls itself the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, has been led by an emir, a central figure ostensibly appointed for life by a religious council of Taliban leaders.</p> <p>Like his two predecessors, the current emir, Hibatullah Akhundzada, has made no public speeches and leads a reclusive life in southern Afghanistan's Kandahar province. He has left the management of day-to-day government affairs to his appointed caretaker Cabinet in the Afghan capital, Kabul.</p> <p>Various estimates by U.S. intelligence agencies and United Nations member states put the number of Taliban fighters between 58,000 and 100,000, with numbers fluctuating according to the time of year and battlefield conditions.</p>

A U.N. report issued in June 2021, prior to the U.S. withdrawal, noted the Taliban force size was "robust in spite of significant attrition rates" over the past few years.

The Taliban have also benefited from the presence of some 8,000 to 10,000 foreign fighters in Afghanistan, most of whom are aligned with the Taliban. The Taliban's defense minister recently said in an interview that the group is trying to build a 110,000-strong army.

Intelligence shared publicly by the United States and United Nations member states further accuses the Taliban of continuing to work closely with al-Qaida and maintaining ties with other terrorist groups, pushing some to become part of a new Taliban-run Afghan military force.

And even if the Taliban are planning to crack down on cells of IS-Khorasan, Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, they may not have the right capabilities.

"I don't think what we'll see from the Taliban will be traditional [counterterrorism] as we think of it," Colin Clarke, director of research at the global intelligence firm The Soufan Group, told VOA last year.

"It's much easier to play a spoiler role than to perform effectively in the role of counterinsurgent," he said. "I think the Taliban could be effective in clearing an area, but it will struggle more with holding it."

For their part, Taliban officials have publicly denied that terrorism is an issue for Afghans under their leadership.

"We do not see anyone in Afghanistan who has anything to do with al-Qaida," Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid told a news conference in Kabul last September.

"The ISIS that exists in Iraq and Syria does not exist here," he added. "We are committed to the fact that from Afghanistan, there will not be any danger to any country."

Islamic State Khorasan Province

The Islamic State terror group's Afghan affiliate is a sworn enemy of both the Taliban and al-Qaida, which has deep and long-standing ties to Taliban leadership. But IS-Khorasan is also one of the groups that has benefited the most from the Taliban takeover.

As Taliban forces asserted control over Afghanistan, they emptied out many of the country's prisons, including the Parwan prison at Bagram Airfield, which had held hundreds of IS-Khorasan fighters.

Taliban commanders quickly executed former IS-Khorasan leader Abu Omar Khorasani, but many other IS followers were allowed to escape.

At the time, U.S. military officials said the prison releases helped swell IS-Khorasan's ranks from several hundred to at least 2,000 "hardcore" fighters. IS-Khorasan was also blamed for the August 26 bombing at Kabul airport that killed 13 Americans and more than 170 Afghans.

Intelligence shared by U.N. member states suggests that since then, IS-Khorasan has nearly doubled in size, to about 4,000 fighters, half of which may be from outside Afghanistan.

The same intelligence estimates say that the group, which lost all the territory under its control in early 2020, now "controls limited territory in eastern Afghanistan" and that it is "capable of conducting high-profile and complex attacks."

IS-Khorasan also appears to be benefitting from financial support from its core in Syria and Iraq, receiving more than \$500,000 over the past six months, according to some intelligence estimates.

U.S. defense officials have further voiced concern about IS-Khorasan regenerating the capability to launch attacks against the U.S. and other foreign targets, initially warning that the group could launch global operations starting in April 2022.

More recent assessments by U.S. military intelligence officials indicate that the group is more focused at the moment on cementing its support within Afghanistan itself and that IS-Khorasan may not be ready to carry out external operations for another 12-18 months.

Al-Qaida core

Since its initial statement at the end of August congratulating the Taliban on its victory, al-Qaida leadership has been mostly silent on the situation in Afghanistan, though al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri referenced "the defeat of the Americans" in a video released this month.

Zawahiri himself is believed to be hiding in Afghanistan, and intelligence agencies from a number of countries assess he is in ill health.

Intelligence shared with the U.N. for a recent report, however, indicates al-Qaida is benefitting from "a significant boost" due to the U.S. withdrawal and Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

"Some of its [al-Qaida's] closest sympathizers within the Taliban now occupy senior positions in the new de facto Afghan administration," according to the U.N. report, which also says chances are now good that Zawahiri's likely successor, Saif al-Adel, will seek to leave Iran and establish himself in Afghanistan.

Western counterterrorism estimates from before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan suggested the al-Qaida core perhaps commanded several hundred fighters across at least 15 Afghan provinces. And in September, a top U.S. intelligence official said that there were "indications of some potential movement of al-Qaida [officials and followers] to Afghanistan," though, he cautioned, "It's still early days."

While U.S. officials remain concerned that al-Qaida will focus again on conducting foreign attacks, a recent report based on U.S. military intelligence assessments indicates that the group has been keeping a low profile at the Taliban's request, and that the Taliban, who are seeking to gain international recognition for their new government, are likely to dissuade al-Qaida leaders from launching attacks.

Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent

One of al-Qaida's key offshoots, al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, has as much of a presence in Afghanistan as the group's core.

Intelligence estimates from U.N. member states say AQIS has up to 400 fighters in Afghanistan, spread across Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika and Zabul provinces.

AQIS fighters, including native Afghans and fighters from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and Myanmar (Burma), are said to have fought alongside Taliban against the U.S.-backed government prior to its collapse. Earlier U.S. intelligence assessments said it appeared that AQIS fighters were actively integrated into Taliban units.

AQIS leader Osama Mehmood and AQIS deputy Atif Yahya Ghouri are both thought to reside in Afghanistan.

Haqqani network

The Haqqani network is widely considered to be the most influential and strategically successful extremist group in the region. While nominally loyal to the Taliban, the network, as described by the U.N., is "semi-autonomous," maintaining ties with both al-Qaida and IS-Khorasan.

The group boasts a "highly skilled core of members who specialize in complex attacks and provide technical skills, such as improvised explosive device and rocket construction," according to the U.N.

It also oversees a force of between 3,000 and 10,000 traditional armed fighters in Khost, Paktika and Paktiya provinces.

The network is run by Sirajuddin Haqqani, a son of the late mujahedeen commander and network founder Jalaluddin Haqqani. For much of its existence, the group has been based in Pakistan's tribal areas as it operated across the border in Afghanistan. The more than 40-year-old Haqqani has a \$10 million bounty on his head from the U.S. government and works as a deputy emir of the Taliban as well as the interior minister of Afghanistan.

The Haqqanis have been accused of perpetuating some of the deadliest and most sophisticated attacks against U.S., Indian and former Afghan government targets in Afghanistan since 2001.

The network is believed to have strong ties to Pakistani intelligence and al-Qaida. The U.S. designated it a foreign terrorist organization in 2012.

Intelligence gathered over the past year from some U.N. member states said that at times, the Haqqanis have acted as a go-between for the Taliban and IS-Khorasan, and that with the tacit approval of the Taliban, they directed the Islamic State affiliate to [attack the now defunct U.S.-backed Afghan government](#).

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan

Most active on the 2,640-kilometer-long border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, or TTP, is an insurgent group involved in terrorist attacks in both countries.

The latest U.N. intelligence estimates put the number of TTP fighters at between 3,000 and 5,500.

The group's stated objectives are to end the Pakistani government's control over the Pashtun territories of Pakistan and to form a strict government based on Islamic Shariah law.

U.S. forces in Afghanistan and the Pakistani military have killed or captured several TTP leaders over the past two decades.

The group's current leader, Noor Wali Mehsud, has publicly declared allegiance to the Afghan Taliban leader.

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan has reportedly reenergized the TTP, and Pakistani officials have sought the Afghan Taliban's assistance in dealing with the group.

The U.N. says those efforts have made some progress.

"Mediation from the Taliban has led to a reduction in TTP attacks against Pakistan," a recent U.N. report found, adding that one country's intelligence agency said the Taliban have been involved in talks aimed at allowing TTP family members to peacefully resettle in Pakistan.

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, was founded in the late 1990s with help and financial support from al-Qaida founder Osama bin Laden, and several IMU leaders have served as part of the al-Qaida hierarchy. The group has sought to replace the Uzbek government with a strictly Islamic regime.

IMU launched its first attack in February 1999 by simultaneously detonating five car bombs in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital. The group is also believed to have carried out attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In 2015, then-IMU leader Usman Ghazi and other senior members of the group shifted allegiance from al-Qaida to the rival Islamic State. But the move did not sit well with Taliban leaders, who launched a major military campaign against Ghazi, killing him and nearly wiping out the group.

IMU's force size was estimated at several hundred in 2018, but the group was reportedly battered by a large-scale Taliban onslaught in Afghanistan's Faryab province that same year.

As of mid-2021, intelligence suggested IMU had broken into Uzbek and Tajik factions, with the Uzbek faction possibly entertaining the idea of joining IS.

Recent intelligence suggests the remnants of IMU were fighting alongside the Taliban as they took over Afghanistan, which has earned the terror group more freedom of movement.

Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari

Khatiba Imam al-Bukhari (KIB) was founded in 2011 by fighters who left the IMU and fought alongside the Taliban against the U.S.-backed Afghan government.

The group is led by Dilshod Dekhanov, a Tajik national.

KIB's forces are in Afghanistan's Badghis province, though the group is also thought to have about 100 or so fighters in Syria, possibly in Latakia or Idlib governorates.

According to the U.N., KIB's numbers in Afghanistan have been growing due to the successful recruitment of locals. KIB not only has received money from the Taliban but also raises funds through its leadership in Syria.

Intelligence shared with the U.N. indicates Dekhanov visited Kabul in September, asking the Taliban to unify KIB and IMU under his leadership.

Dekhanov's request was denied, reports say, with Taliban officials pushing to make the KIB part of a new Taliban army.

Islamic Jihad Group

According to intelligence assessments shared with the U.N., the Islamic Jihad Group is considered "the most combat-ready Central Asian group in Afghanistan" and known for expertise in "military tactics and the manufacture of improvised explosive devices."

The group is led by a Kyrgyz national named Ilimbek Mamatov. The group's second-in-command, Amsattor Atabaev, hails from Tajikistan.

IJG's fighters operate across Badakhshan, Baghlan and Kunduz provinces, fought alongside Taliban forces against the previous government, and even got some financial support from the Taliban over the past year.

Like KIB's leader, Mamatov is reported to have asked Taliban leaders to unite key Central Asian groups under his leadership. But, reports say, his request was rejected.

Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement/Turkistan Islamic Party

The Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), also known as the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), was first established in the Xinjiang region of China, with its first reported attack in 1998.

After 2001, it began getting help from both al-Qaida and the Taliban, and it has been consistently active in Afghanistan since 2007.

According to intelligence estimates provided by U.N. member states, ETIM has between 200 and 700 fighters in Afghanistan training and plotting for attacks on Chinese targets.

Most of the ETIM fighters had been in Badakhshan province, which borders China. But according to a recent U.N. report, the Taliban recently relocated many of the fighters "to both protect and restrain the group."

Recent intelligence suggests that ETIM fighters have embraced the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and that members have been encouraged to forge deeper ties with Afghanistan.

"They also anticipate that the Taliban de facto administration will provide them with refugee status and passports, enabling them to travel internationally," the U.N. said in a recent report.

In addition to the group's close ties with the Taliban and al-Qaida, it has been reported to collaborate with other groups in Afghanistan including TTP and Jamaat Ansarullah, an ethnically Tajik faction of the IMU.

Intelligence also suggests that IS-Khorasan has increased its recruiting of ETIM members.

Lashkar-e-Islam

Lashkar-e-Islam was founded in the Khyber district of Pakistan in 2004 but relocated to Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in 2014, following clashes with the Pakistani military.

Since coming to Afghanistan, [Lashkar-e-Islam has clashed with IS-Khorasan](#), with major skirmishes taking place in 2018 as the two groups fought for control of territory and resources.

Hezb-e-Islami

Hezb-e-Islami, or "Party of Islam," was founded in 1976 by former Afghan Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

The group shares much of the same ideology as the Taliban, and its fighter have assisted in Taliban in the past.

In 2015, Hekmatyar ordered his followers to help IS fighters in Afghanistan but never pledged allegiance to IS.

Hezb-e-Islami was known to target U.S. forces in Afghanistan, carrying out a series of attacks on U.S. and coalition forces in from 2013-15.

Lashkar-e-Taiba

Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), or "Army of the Pure," was founded in Pakistan in the 1990s and is sometimes known as Jamaat-ud-Dawa.

Led by Hafiz Muhammad Saeed and aligned with al-Qaida, the group is perhaps best known for carrying out the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India, which killed more than 160 people.

LeT established an office in Quetta, Pakistan, in 2006 to assist the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the group has also reportedly sent fighters to Afghanistan to assist the Taliban in their efforts.

In June 2021, a blast outside Saeed's home killed three people. The U.S. is offering a \$10 million reward for information leading to Saeed's conviction in the Mumbai terror attacks.

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HEADLINE	03/21 Germany: train attacker extremist motive
SOURCE	https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/world/2022/03/21/german-prosecutors-train-attacker-had-extremist-motive/
GIST	<p>BERLIN – German prosecutors said Monday they now believe that the suspect in a knife attack on a train in November that left four people wounded had an Islamic extremist motive.</p> <p>The attack took place on an ICE high-speed train traveling from Passau, on the Austrian border, to Hamburg on Nov. 6. Authorities said that the man attacked his victims apparently at random and showed signs of mental illness, but initially said there was no immediate indication of a terror motive.</p>

	<p>Munich prosecutors said a few weeks later that they were no longer ruling out an Islamic extremist motive.</p> <p>On Monday, they said that investigations have produced “weighty indications” that the suspect's actions were based on support for the Islamic State group's ideology, though there was no evidence so far that he was involved with or “steered” by the group.</p> <p>An expert has concluded that the man could be held criminally responsible for his actions, and he was sent to jail in January. Federal prosecutors, who handle terrorism and national security cases in Germany, have now taken over the investigation.</p> <p>Police have said that the suspect, a Syrian citizen, came to Germany in 2014 and was granted asylum in 2016. He had been living in Passau.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Terror groups in Africa ‘growing threats’
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/africom-commander-terror-groups-in-africa-remain-grave-and-growing-threats-to-americans/
GIST	<p>U.S. Army Gen. Stephen Townsend, commander, U.S. Africa Command, wrapped up his annual posture statement to Congress with a hearing before the House Armed Services Committee March 17.</p> <p>Townsend testified alongside U.S. Marine Corps General Frank McKenzie, Jr., commander, U.S. Central Command, and Sasha Baker, Deputy Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy. Townsend and McKenzie testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee March 15.</p> <p>“For nearly three years, it’s been a great privilege – the privilege of my career – to represent the dedicated members of U.S. Africa Command,” Townsend said during his opening statement to the Senate committee. “Together with our interagency teammates, AFRICOM protects and advances U.S. strategic interests, prevents strategic distraction and preserves America’s options all in concert with our allies and partners.”</p> <p>Townsend said that as U.S. Africa Command’s fifth commander, he has come to learn five truths about Africa.</p> <p>“First, America cannot ignore Africa. Africa’s challenges, opportunities and security interests are inseparable from our own. Weak or poor governance, conflict and climate change stress the stability of many African nations which will in turn impact U.S. security and prosperity,” he said.</p> <p>Second, Townsend said, America’s strategic competitors clearly see Africa’s potential, with Russia and China both seeking to convert hard and soft power investments into political influence, strategic access and military advantage.</p> <p>“Third, deadly terrorism has metastasized to Africa,” he said, with al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda’s fastest growing and most kinetically active affiliate, in East Africa, and ISIS and Al Qaeda groups in West Africa and elsewhere among the world’s fastest growing, wealthiest, and deadliest terrorist groups. “(They) remain grave and growing threats that aspire to kill Americans both there and in our homeland.”</p> <p>Fourth, despite a recent surge in democratic backsliding, Townsend said, “Our values, our democracy and our willingness to work together with African partners creates a huge demand for U.S. engagement and partnership.”</p> <p>And finally, he said, employing only 0.3 percent of the DOD operating budget, U.S. Africa Command is an economy-of-force command that yields outsized returns for U.S. and African security interests.</p> <p>Africa lies at a global crossroads and presents a complex environment ripe with opportunity while burdened with challenges.</p>

	<p>“It holds tremendous geo-strategic significance while being shaped by the competing forces of prosperity and poverty, peace and conflict, plenty and famine, good governance and corruption and democratic backsliding,” Townsend said. “These tensions are evident throughout Africa—a continent whose socio-economic importance to the future cannot be ignored.”</p> <p>African Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth is a global leader averaging 4.9 percent per year since 2000, outpacing global GDP growth by 2 percent over the same period. This growth makes the continent a powerful part of the global economy—for both supply and demand. With some estimates projecting a quarter of the world’s population will live in Africa by 2050—a billion of whom will be under 18 and entering the labor force – this impact is likely to increase.</p> <p>“How those acting on this continent—including Africans, allies, partners and competitors—mitigate or exacerbate the drivers of fragility, like climate change and violent extremism, will determine whether this human potential serves as a catalyst for growth or a contributor to global crises,” Townsend said.</p> <p>Townsend said a more stable and prosperous Africa will enhance America’s security and U.S. Africa Command is committed to its work to improve security and stability as part of a whole-of-government approach on the continent, doing our part lessen the sources of extremist recruitment, to create stable political environments, to improve governance and to promote democracy and the rule of law.</p> <p>“A sustained and coordinated U.S. government approach, bolstered by strategic vision and appropriate resourcing, can serve to strengthen relationships with partners in Africa, preserve U.S. interests, and further our objective for increased security, stability and prosperity,” he said.</p>
Return to Top	For more information about the testimony, please visit https://www.africom.mil/about-the-command/2022-posture-statement-to-congress

HEADLINE	03/20 Plea bargain talks ahead of 9/11 trial
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/us/politics/sept-11-trial-quantanamo.html
GIST	<p>GUANTÁNAMO BAY, Cuba — Pentagon prosecutors have struggled for more than a dozen years to hold the death-penalty trial of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the accused mastermind of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and his four co-defendants at Guantánamo Bay.</p> <p>They have litigated everything from Mr. Mohammed’s choice of court attire — he sometimes dons a paramilitary camouflage vest — to how much evidence of C.I.A. torture the defense teams and, ultimately, a military jury should be allowed to see.</p> <p>Now a trial prosecutor who has been on the case since the George W. Bush administration, Clayton G. Trivett Jr., is in talks with defense lawyers about trading guilty pleas for at most life in prison without parole.</p> <p>Why are the two sides talking? Here is a rundown.</p> <p>Delays, Delays, Delays</p> <p>Between stalled litigation during the coronavirus pandemic and the pace of discovery and pretrial hearings, jury selection cannot start before mid-2024 — and that is according to the most optimistic estimate.</p> <p>But that was before the death-penalty lawyer for one of the defendants, Walid bin Attash, asked to quit the case, creating a potential vacancy in a key position that must be filled unless prosecutors abandon their insistence on a joint, five-man trial.</p> <p>The coronavirus has already forced a 500-day recess. An earlier judge, the third on the case, retired at the start of the pandemic. The current judge, Col. Matthew N. McCall, did not get the assignment until August because prosecutors considered him too inexperienced. He has since limited the pace of litigation while he learns the court record, including thousands of pages of secret prosecution filings.</p>

New Political Leadership

Detention operations at Guantánamo Bay, which have held [780 men and boys as detainees, have lasted for](#) four administrations. Mr. Bush established the prison and court system, and President Barack Obama overhauled the court with the goal of ending detainee operations. Congress thwarted him.

President Donald J. Trump maintained the operation, and promised to add new prisoners, but never did. His first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, was opposed to negotiations. In 2017, after Mr. Sessions learned that the senior Pentagon official overseeing the trial was discussing a plea with defense lawyers, he [called Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and declared “no deal.”](#) Mr. Mattis [fired the overseer, Harvey Rishikof,](#) citing other reasons.

President Biden came into office with the goal of ending detention operations at Guantánamo Bay.

A letter written by a lawyer at his National Security Council acknowledges that pretrial plea deals could be appropriate as a way to resolve some military commissions cases, but stresses that the White House takes no position on what should happen in any particular matter.

New Leadership on Trial Teams

The long-running chief war crimes prosecutor, Brig. Gen. Mark S. Martins, [retired from the Army in September](#). An even longer-serving case prosecutor, Robert Swann, left the case in late 2021. Relatives of some of the victims of the Sept. 11 attacks who have met the men — including those who oppose and favor the death penalty — describe them as solidly committed to bringing the case to a capital trial.

The new interim chief prosecutor, George C. Kraehe, an Army Reserve colonel, has delegated the authority to negotiate to three civilians, all Justice Department employees, who have been on the case since the beginning: Mr. Trivett, a Navy Reserve commander; Edward Ryan, a federal prosecutor; and Jeffrey D. Groharing, a Marine Corps Reserve colonel.

The defense teams have new leadership, too. Brig. Gen. Jackie L. Thompson Jr. of the Army took charge as the chief defense counsel in January and wrote Mr. Biden seeking support for resolving the case through pleas.

One of the nation’s leading and longest-serving capital defense lawyers, David I. Bruck, also made his first court appearance in the case in September.

The Majid Khan Case

Last year, a military jury’s condemnation of torture by the C.I.A. in another war crimes case raised questions of whether prosecutors could win a unanimous death-penalty decision even for [Mr. Mohammed](#), 53, the accused architect of the hijackings plot.

In the case of Majid Khan, a confessed courier for Al Qaeda, U.S. military officers on his jury called his cruel treatment “[a stain on the moral fiber of America](#)” and urged the Pentagon overseer of the war court to grant the prisoner clemency. Mr. Khan was abused rectally and kept nude, sleep deprived and nearly starved in the same program of “enhanced interrogation” that tortured Mr. Mohammed, who was also waterboarded 183 times.

[Charles Stimson](#), a retired Navy judge who managed detainee policy at the Pentagon for the Bush administration from 2005 to 2007, said recently that the Khan case illustrated that, even if prosecutors get the Sept. 11 defendants to trial and win a conviction, “the likelihood of their coming to a unanimous verdict with respect to the death penalty is close to zero.”

Negotiations are appropriate even for the “worst war crime that has been committed in our lifetime,” said Mr. Stimson, who is now a scholar at the conservative Heritage Foundation. “Any man or woman serving in the United States military who hears about the treatment that these detainees had at the hands of the

United States government is going to weigh that quite heavily in the sentencing portion of the trial. And it won't go over well."

More Disclosures of Torture

At first, court security officers briefed by the intelligence agencies forbade mention of the word "torture" in open court hearings.

A lawyer could not explain why the Saudi defendant [Mustafa al-Hawsawi](#), 53, who is accused of helping the Sept. 11 hijackers with travel and expenses, sat gingerly on a pillow in court. In time, his lawyers were allowed to say he was sodomized by the C.I.A. during his detention in the black sites.

The more time has passed, the more grisly details about the program that held and tortured the defendants between 2002 and 2006 have emerged — despite claims by prosecutors for years that the defense teams had all the evidence they needed to prepare for trial.

But three of the presiding judges have ordered the disclosure of more and more information, often requiring permission of the C.I.A. or other intelligence agencies.

Since getting the case over the summer, defense lawyers say, Colonel McCall has ordered even more disclosures.

In those situations, if prosecutors invoke a national security privilege and refuse to provide the material, the judge can order remedies. He could suspend the case until the government turns over the information. He could dismiss the case. Or he could downgrade it by making life in prison the ultimate possible sentence

Mounting Mental Illness Claims

Lawyers for Mr. Mohammed's nephew, [Ammar al-Baluchi](#), 44, have long argued that the prisoner is brain damaged as a result of his torture by the C.I.A., and that he needs rehabilitation that the military at Guantánamo cannot provide.

His defense team recently submitted material to a federal court panel about a 2003 episode in which C.I.A. trainees were taught an enhanced interrogation technique called "walling." They took turns slamming his head into a wall until he blacked out.

The health of the man accused of serving as a deputy to Mr. Mohammed in the Sept. 11 plot, [Ramzi bin al-Shibh](#), 49, has also long clouded the case. At first, his claims that he was being sleep deprived by outside forces making noises and vibrating his prison cell interfered with his lawyers' ability to craft a defense. In recent years, the problems escalated to him howling from sharp pinprick pains in his genitals and other body parts.

Last month, the U.S. military [delivered to Saudi Arabia](#) for psychiatric care a schizophrenic prisoner whose torture by U.S. forces long ago made him ineligible for the Sept. 11 conspiracy trial. That man, Mohammed al-Qahtani, was held at Guantánamo as the suspected would-be 20th hijacker for two decades, only to be recommended for release after a Navy doctor concluded he could not get proper care at the prison.

Changing Political Climate

Be it distraction by the events in Ukraine or a sense that something has changed 20 years after the Sept. 11 attacks, few Republicans protested the decision to release Mr. Qahtani, leading some critics of the military prison in Cuba to suggest that Guantánamo has receded as a political rallying point.

"The Bush administration tortured the defendants and built a system to avoid the consequences of it," said Scott Roehm, the Washington director of the Center for Victims of Torture. "That was never going to work."

	<p>He called it noteworthy that, while a few Republicans made an impassioned defense of the need to keep Guantánamo open, none of them spoke up at a Senate Judiciary Committee meeting in December after the chief defense counsel at the time, Brig. Gen. John G. Baker, argued for the “negotiated resolution of the cases.”</p> <p>“Much of the hearing was a discussion of plea deals,” Mr. Roehm said. “And nobody said: ‘This is crazy. Don’t do this. We object to a plea strategy.’ There wasn’t any pushback at all.”</p> <p>Instead, Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, offered a spirited defense of Guantánamo-style detention under the laws of war.</p> <p>“I’ve never accepted the false choice of ‘try them or release them,’” he said. “You can hold somebody until they die as an enemy combatant if it’s unsafe to release them if the war is not over.”</p> <p>“If we can try them, great,” said Mr. Graham, a retired Air Force JAG colonel. “If we can’t, let’s hold them.”</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Afghanistan unhappiest even before Taliban
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/afghanistan-worlds-unhappiest-country-even-before-taliban/
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Afghanistan is the unhappiest country in the world — even before the Taliban swept to power last August. That’s according to a so-called World Happiness report released ahead of the U.N.-designated International Day of Happiness on Sunday.</p> <p>The annual report ranked Afghanistan as last among 149 countries surveyed, with a happiness rate of just 2.5. Lebanon was the world’s second saddest country, with Botswana, Rwanda and Zimbabwe rounding out the bottom five. Finland ranked first for the fourth year running with a 7.8 score, followed by Denmark and Switzerland, with Iceland and the Netherlands also in the top five.</p> <p>Researchers ranked the countries after analyzing data over three years. They looked at several categories, including gross domestic product per capita, social safety nets, life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity of the population, and perceptions of internal and external corruption levels.</p> <p>Afghanistan stacked up poorly in all six categories, a confounding result coming as it did before the Taliban arrival and despite 20 years of U.S. and international investment. The U.S. alone spent \$145 billion on development in Afghanistan since 2002, according to reports by the U.S. special inspector general for Afghanistan.</p> <p>Still, there were signs of increasing hopelessness.</p> <p>Gallup did a polling in 2018 and found that few Afghans they surveyed had much hope for the future. In fact the majority said they had no hope for the future.</p> <p>Years of runaway corruption, increased poverty, lack of jobs, a steady increase in people forced below the poverty line, and erratic development all combined into a crushing malaise, said analyst Nasratullah Haqpal. Most Afghans had high hopes after 2001, when the Taliban were ousted and the U.S.-led coalition declared victory,</p> <p>“Unfortunately the only focus was on the war, the warlords and the corrupt politicians,” said Haqpal.</p> <p>“People just became poorer and poorer and more disappointed and more unhappy... that is why these 20 years of investment in Afghanistan collapsed in just 11 days,” he said referring to the Taliban’s lightning blitz through the country before sweeping into Kabul in mid August.</p> <p>When Masoud Ahmadi, a carpenter, returned to Afghanistan from neighboring Pakistan after the 2001 collapse of the Taliban, his hopes for the future were bright. He dreamed of opening a small furniture-</p>

making shop, maybe employing as many as 10 people. Instead, sitting in his dusty 6-foot by 10-foot workshop on Saturday, he said he opens just twice a week for lack of work.

“When the money came to this country, the leadership of the government took the money and counted it as their personal money, and the people were not helped to change their life for the better,” said Ahmadi.

The report warns that Afghanistan’s numbers might drop even further next year when it measures Afghans’ happiness level after the arrival of the Taliban. The economy is currently in free fall as the group struggles to transition from insurgency to governing.

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	03/21 Texas battled 175 wildfires in past week
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/21/us/texas-wildfires-monday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Firefighters in Texas are working to protect people and homes as 175 wildfires have burned nearly 95,000 acres across the state in the past week, the state's forest service said Sunday.</p> <p>As of Sunday, there were 23 active wildfires, Texas A&M Forest Service spokeswoman Erin O'Connor said, the largest of those being the Eastland Complex Fire ripping through central Texas.</p> <p>The complex fire was a combination of four fires Saturday, according to the Texas A&M Forest Service, but by Sunday, three more fires had been added, totaling an estimated 54,015 acres and only 30% containment, the forest service said.</p> <p>The seven fires in the Eastland Complex Fire include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Kidd Fire, Eastland County (42,333 acres, 40% contained)• Blowing Basin Fire, Eastland County (est. 258 acres, 50% contained)• Cedar Mountain Fire, Eastland County (est. 179 acres, 0% contained)• Oak Mott Fire, Brown County (4,031 acres, 75% contained)• Wheat Field Fire, Eastland County (7,268 acres, 55% contained)• Mangum Fire, Eastland County (est. 11 acres, 85% contained)• Walling Fire, Eastland County (383 acres, 100% contained) <p>The four initial fires that formed the Eastland Complex Fire began Wednesday and Thursday, the forest service said. More than 140 structures are reported destroyed, fire officials said, without differentiating between homes, businesses or outbuildings. On Friday, Gov. Greg Abbott said at least 50 homes across three communities had been destroyed.</p> <p>Some relief may come Monday afternoon as the region is expected to be in the path of severe storms and could get up to two inches of rain, CNN Meteorologist Robert Shackelford said. Statewide, the severe weather could impact up to 20 million Texans throughout the afternoon and evening hours, Shackelford added.</p> <p>At least one person has died as a result of the flames. Eastland County Deputy Sgt. Barbara Fenley died Thursday night as she helped evacuate people in the town of Carbon, about 100 miles west of Fort Worth. She was last heard from while on her way to assist an elderly person, the Eastland County Sheriff's Office said.</p> <p>Amid deteriorating conditions and low visibility from smoke, Fenley ran off the roadway and was killed in the flames, the sheriff's office said.</p> <p>Abbott, who on Friday issued a disaster declaration for 11 counties, including Eastland, ordered flags be flown at half-staff in Fenley's honor.</p>

	<p>"We will never forget her sacrifice," the governor said.</p> <p>Elsewhere in central Texas, a firefighter was injured Sunday while battling the Big L Fire, Hood County Sheriff's Office Lt. Johnny Rose said.</p> <p>"The fireman has superficial burns to the face and is in good condition," said Rose in a Facebook post.</p> <p>The Big L Fire has scorched at least 11,000 acres across Erath and Hood counties and is 10% contained, the forest service said early Monday.</p> <p>The fire is located at W US Highway 377 on "FM 1189 and Boswell Ct. south of Lipan," a city in Hood County, said Rose.</p> <p>"Anyone north or northwest of the above location needs to evacuate immediately," said the sheriff's office post.</p> <p>Hood County is about 40 miles southwest of Fort Worth.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Wildfires devastate land, warm the planet
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20220318-wildfires-devastate-the-land-they-burn-and-they-are-also-warming-the-planet
GIST	<p>The 2021 wildfire season broke records globally, leaving land charred from California to Siberia. The risk of fire is growing, and a report published by the UN last month warned that wildfires are on track to increase 50% by 2050. These fires destroy homes, plant life, and animals as they burn, but the risk doesn't stop there. In the journal <i>One Earth</i>, researchers detail how the brown carbon released by burning biomass in the northern hemisphere is accelerating warming in the Arctic and warn that this could lead to even more wildfires in the future.</p> <p>Blazing wildfires are accompanied by vast plumes of brown smoke, made up of particles of brown carbon suspended in the air. This smoke poses health hazards, and can even block out the summer sun, and researchers suspected that it might also be contributing to global warming.</p> <p>In 2017, the Chinese icebreaker vessel <i>Xue Long</i> headed for the Arctic Ocean to examine which aerosols were floating around in the pristine Arctic air and identify their sources. The scientists on the vessel were particularly curious about how brown carbon released by wildfires was affecting the climate and how its warming effects compared to those of denser black carbon from high-temperature fossil fuel burning, the second most powerful warming agent after carbon dioxide.</p> <p>Their results showed that brown carbon was contributing to warming more than previously thought. "To our surprise, observational analyses and numerical simulations show that the warming effect of brown carbon aerosols over the Arctic is up to about 30% of that of black carbon," says senior author Pingqing Fu, an atmospheric chemist at Tianjin University.</p> <p>In the last 50 years, the Arctic has been warming at a rate three times that of the rest of the planet, and it appears that wildfires are helping to drive this discrepancy. The researchers found that brown carbon from burning biomass was responsible for at least twice as much warming as brown carbon from fossil fuel burning.</p> <p>Like black carbon and carbon dioxide, brown carbon warms the planet by absorbing solar radiation. Since warming temperatures have been linked to the rise in wildfires in recent years, this leads to a positive feedback loop. "The increase in brown carbon aerosols will lead to global or regional warming, which increases the probability and frequency of wildfires," says Fu. "Increased wildfire events will emit more brown carbon aerosols, further heating the earth, thus making wildfires more frequent."</p>

	For future research, Fu and his colleagues plan to investigate how wildfires are changing aerosol composition from sources other than brown carbon. Specifically, they are interested in the effect of fires on bioaerosols, which originate from plants and animals and can contain living organisms, including pathogens. In the meantime, Fu urges that attention be focused on wildfire mitigation. “Our findings highlight just how important it is to control wildfires,” he says.
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HEADLINE	03/18 Great Barrier Reef bleaching event unfolds
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/mar/18/dead-coral-found-at-great-barrier-reef-as-widespread-bleaching-event-unfolds
GIST	<p>Dead corals are being recorded in aerial surveys across the Great Barrier Reef in what the marine park’s chief scientist says is a widespread and serious bleaching event on the world heritage icon.</p> <p>Aerial surveys have covered half of the 2,300km reef, with the worst bleaching observed in the park’s central region off Townsville, where corals on some reefs are dead and dying.</p> <p>The unfolding bleaching comes ahead of a 10-day UN monitoring mission to the reef due to start on Monday.</p> <p>Leading reef scientist Prof Terry Hughes said this week a sixth mass bleaching event was now unfolding on the reef, adding to events in 1998, 2002, 2016, 2017 and 2020.</p> <p>Dr David Wachenfeld, chief scientist at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, told Guardian Australia: “There is certainly a risk we are seeing a mass bleaching event, but we aren’t in a position to confirm that yet.</p> <p>“We want to finish the aerial surveys to really understand this before we make a call on the extent and severity of this bleaching.”</p> <p>Lobbying last year by the Morrison government saw the 21-country world heritage committee go against UN advice to put the reef on a list of sites in danger. The committee will consider the reef again at a meeting in June, armed with a report from the UN visit.</p> <p>Aerial surveys from helicopters that started last Saturday have revealed mild to moderate bleaching driven by rising ocean temperatures on reefs in the remote far north, with the most badly hit reefs across a 250km stretch to the north and south of Townsville.</p> <p>Most reefs in that central region, between Hinchinbrook Island and Bowen, were severely bleached and there were still reefs not yet surveyed there.</p> <p>Bleaching is considered minor if less than 10% of corals on an individual reef are bleached. Levels up to 30% are categorised as moderate, up to 60% is major and beyond that, bleaching is considered severe.</p> <p>“We certainly have widespread bleaching. It’s variable,” Wachenfeld said.</p> <p>“The fact that at the very least, from Hinchinbrook to Bowen, most reefs are severely bleached – this is a very serious event. There is no question about that. Some of the observations in that region have been of coral mortality.</p> <p>“That is where the heat stress has been worst. We haven’t yet surveyed all that area, but I would expect that situation of most reefs being severely bleached would go north and south of Bowen.”</p>

Aerial surveys started while the heat stress was still building across large parts of the reef. Wachenfeld said rather than wait until the heat had peaked, the flights had started because “we are starting to see coral die.”

When a coral bleaches, the transparent flesh and white skeleton are easy to see from the air. But if it dies, the flesh begins to rot and is quickly taken over by algae which is darker in colour.

“You then can’t see from the air that a living coral was there a week ago,” said Wachenfeld.

Flights are expected to continue until the end of next week. Planes will be used to survey outer reefs in the south.

Surveys have not yet been conducted over the major tourism areas around Cairns and Port Douglas, but heat stress has been lower in those areas.

In the remote north, Wachenfeld said some reefs had not recovered from a severe 2016 bleaching event. Reports of “no bleaching” from this week’s flights were down to there being little live coral left.

Dr Britta Schaffelke, director of Great Barrier Reef research at the Australian Institute of Marine Science – a partner in the survey effort – told Guardian Australia it was too early to know how the current event compared to previous ones.

“At the moment, what we see is widespread and in some parts it is severe and that is worrying. There is no doubt about it,” she said.

While some bleached corals can recover, those badly hit can take weeks or months to die from bleaching, so the full impact of the current event will take a long time to fully understand.

“It’s a major stress event for corals even if they don’t die from it. There is no historical record of such stress events happening so frequently,” Schaffelke said.

Richard Leck, head of oceans at WWF Australia, said bleaching was directly attributable to global heating caused by rising greenhouse gas emissions.

“Reducing Australia’s domestic and exported emissions fast, this decade, is the main solution within our control,” he said.

The environment group released analysis on Friday showing that for Australia to be part of efforts to keep global heating to 1.5C, the country should release no more than 4bn tonnes of CO2 between now and mid-century.

But the analysis, carried out by scientists, said the Morrison government’s current strategy to reach net zero would release 9.6bn tonnes.

“We’re going to blow our emissions budget by more than double,” said Leck.

Dr Zebedee Nicholls, one of the scientists that carried out the analysis, said: “The science is clear: the outlook for coral reefs around the world is bad at 1.5C, and their fate is all but sealed at 2C.”

Greenpeace Australia climate impacts campaigner Martin Zavan said: “This latest bleaching event has once again exposed the Morrison government’s failure to protect the Great Barrier Reef, throwing billions at band-aid measures while failing to address climate change, the biggest driver of catastrophic coral damage.”

	<p>Kelly O'Shanassy, chief executive of the Australian Conservation Foundation, said: "If the federal government is serious about its claim of wanting to protect the Great Barrier Reef it must rapidly phase out coal, oil and gas and stop encouraging the growth of fossil fuel industries."</p> <p>Dr Lissa Schindler, reef campaigner at the Australian Marine Conservation Society, said the unfolding bleaching was "disastrous news" for the marine and communities that relied on the reef.</p> <p>"What is most concerning is that this widespread bleaching is happening during a La Niña weather event, which is normally characterised by rain and cloud cover on the east coast of Australia often helping to cool waters. It shows the consistent pressure our reef is now under from global heating."</p> <p>Guardian Australia has approached the environment minister, Sussan Ley, for comment about the bleaching.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Antarctica, Arctic freakish extreme heat
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/hot-poles-antarctica-arctic-70-and-50-degrees-above-normal/
GIST	<p>Earth's poles are undergoing simultaneous freakish extreme heat with parts of Antarctica more than 70 degrees warmer than average and areas of the Arctic more than 50 degrees warmer than average.</p> <p>Weather stations in Antarctica shattered records Friday as the region neared autumn. The two-mile high Concordia station was at 10 degrees, which is about 70 degrees warmer than average, while the even higher Vostok station hit a shade above 0 degrees, beating its record by about 27 degrees, according to a tweet from extreme weather record tracker Maximiliano Herrera.</p> <p>The coastal Terra Nova Base was far above freezing at 44.6 degrees.</p> <p>It caught officials at the National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colorado, by surprise because they were paying attention to the Arctic where it was 50 degrees warmer than average and areas around the North Pole were nearing or at the melting point, which is really unusual for mid-March, said center ice scientist Walt Meier.</p> <p>"They are opposite seasons. You don't see the north and the south (poles) both melting at the same time," Meier told The Associated Press Friday evening. "It's definitely an unusual occurrence."</p> <p>"It's pretty stunning," Meier added.</p> <p>"Wow. I have never seen anything like this in the Antarctic," said University of Colorado ice scientist Ted Scambos, who returned recently from an expedition to the continent.</p> <p>"Not a good sign when you see that sort of thing happen," said University of Wisconsin meteorologist Matthew Lazzara.</p> <p>Lazzara monitors temperatures at East Antarctica's Dome C-ii and logged 14 degrees Friday, where the normal is -45 degrees: "That's a temperature that you should see in January, not March. January is summer there. That's dramatic."</p> <p>Both Lazzara and Meier said what happened in Antarctica is probably just a random weather event and not a sign of climate change. But if it happens again or repeatedly then it might be something to worry about and part of global warming, they said.</p> <p>The Antarctic warm spell was first reported by The Washington Post.</p> <p>The Antarctic continent as a whole on Friday was about 8.6 degrees warmer than a baseline temperature between 1979 and 2000, according to the University of Maine's Climate Reanalyzer, based on U.S. National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration weather models. That 8-degree heating over an already</p>

	<p>warmed-up average is unusual, think of it as if the entire United States was 8 degrees hotter than normal, Meier said.</p> <p>At the same time, on Friday the Arctic as a whole was 6 degrees warmer than the 1979 to 2000 average.</p> <p>By comparison, the world as a whole was only 1.1 degrees above the 1979 to 2000 average. Globally the 1979 to 2000 average is about half a degree warmer than the 20th century average.</p> <p>What makes the Antarctic warming really weird is that the southern continent — except for its vulnerable peninsula which is warming quickly and losing ice rapidly — has not been warming much, especially when compared to the rest of the globe, Meier said.</p> <p>Antarctica did set a record for the lowest summer sea ice — records go back to 1979 — with it shrinking to 741,000 square miles in late February, the snow and ice data center reported.</p> <p>What likely happened was “a big atmospheric river” pumped in warm and moist air from the Pacific southward, Meier said.</p> <p>And in the Arctic, which has been warming two to three times faster than the rest of the globe and is considered vulnerable to climate change, warm Atlantic air was coming north off the coast of Greenland.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 PNSN: ‘mystery boom’ Orcas Island
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/weather/earthquakes/mystery-booms-orcas-island/281-48897bf1-9b03-496a-a2b5-8befdfb049de
GIST	<p>EASTSOUND, Wash. — The Pacific Northwest Seismic Network (PNSN) is investigating a "mystery boom" heard coming from Orcas Island last week.</p> <p>The boom was heard early in the morning on March 7 by a retired seismologist, Tom Owens, according to PNSN. He also reported a similar boom that was accompanied by a flash of light back in December.</p> <p>Owens checked the PNSN seismic records and found that a "short pulse of seismic energy" was picked up by PNSN seismic stations on the San Juan Islands. He contacted the seismic network to see if researchers had any thoughts on what the sound could have been, according to a blog posted by PNSN.</p> <p>Steve Malone, a Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington and former director of PNSN, was able to get an approximate location for the source of the boom by looking at the time the boom registered on different instruments across the network. Malone determined the boom occurred near Crescent Beach Preserve just east of Eastsound on Orcas Island.</p> <p>Malone discovered the boom was not made by any shaking in the ground, saying the seismic recordings were consistent with the "velocity of acoustic (sound) waves in the air."</p> <p>Atmospheric conditions for what was a "relatively small explosion" had to be just right for the boom to be clearly recorded up to 23 miles away from the origin of the sound, Malone wrote. Little wind and a stable atmosphere without much fluctuation in temperature are required for the sound waves to cover that distance.</p> <p>Was it a meteor? A fireball? Booms have originated from these sources before, and a meteor was caught on a doorbell camera in Bellingham that same night. However, it occurred 15 minutes later than the boom that registered on PNSN's seismic records.</p> <p>"There are only a couple of possible very small signals that could be attributed to it," Malone wrote. "So our mystery boom was not a high atmospheric explosion."</p>

	<p>More nighttime booms have been recorded by the San Juan Islander and on Social media, but only one appeared to be similar to the sound heard on March 7. According to PNSN records, a nighttime boom was heard on Dec. 5, 2021, which was registered on area seismic stations.</p> <p>The noise seemed to originate slightly south of Crescent Beach, out in Ship Bay. However, error estimates could put the source of the boom back on land, near the same location of the boom recorded on March 7, Malone said.</p> <p>"At this point, we are left with explosive sources that are probably not legal for at least some if not all of these booms," Malone wrote.</p> <p>PNSN has detected and located accidental explosions before, including one in north Seattle and one in Port Orchard that resulted in fatalities.</p> <p>"The early morning times and no one taking credit for these booms makes them less than innocent," Malone wrote.</p> <p>The San Juan County Sheriff's Office has been investigating similar reports of mysterious booms and asks that anyone who has information contact them at (360) 378-4151 or at the anonymous tip line at (360) 370-7629. Anyone who hears any strange nighttime booms is invited to email PNSN at pnsn@uw.edu with the times and general area of the noise to see if they were seismically recorded.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	03/20 Dallas police: 10 wounded in shooting
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/20/us/dallas-shooting/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)At least ten people were wounded in an overnight shooting in Dallas early Sunday, according to Dallas Police Department spokesperson Brian Martinez.</p> <p>The Dallas Police Department initially said one person died in the shooting -- which occurred in the 5200 block of Botham Jean Boulevard -- but updated their statement to say that the individual survived the shooting.</p> <p>"Preliminary information reported that one individual was taken to a local hospital where they died -- that individual is still in critical condition at this time," Martinez said in an email Sunday.</p> <p>An undetermined number of individuals were injured while trying to get away from the shooting scene, Martinez added.</p> <p>Police cautioned that information is limited and the investigation into the shooting is ongoing.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Inside secret drug culture at West Point
SOURCE	https://nypost.com/2022/03/19/inside-secret-drug-culture-at-west-point-other-military-schools/
GIST	<p>Former West Point cadet Chris Monge was thrown out of school and into military prison for dealing and using cocaine, Xanax and opiates at the country's foremost military academy in 2017.</p> <p>Army prosecutors called him a drug "kingpin" at the US Military Academy in Orange County, NY. Monge, now, 27, was so hooked on opiates that even when he returned to the campus in disgrace to meet with his lawyer and prep for his court martial, he was using.</p>

Over the three-day process, he drove more than two-and-a-half hours — twice — back to his Allentown, Penn., hometown to get through it.

“I was high the day of the hearing,” Monge told The Post. “I pled guilty to all charges and got sentenced to thirty months at Fort Leavenworth. I did fifteen months and was paroled for ten months.”

He hopes West Point may be more forgiving of the cadets [who ingested fentanyl-tainted cocaine](#) during a spring break getaway in Wilton Manors, Fla., on March 11.

The five New York cadets — all men in their early 20s and at least one a football player — had been partying at an Airbnb rental north of Fort Lauderdale, neighbors said. All but one have been released from the hospital.

A former Air Force cadet who attended the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., said he wasn’t surprised to hear at least one football player was among the overdose victims.

“Cocaine was really prevalent among the football team,” he told The Post. “They would wait until a long weekend to do it because it leaves your system quickly. Weed can stay for a long time. We were randomly tested at the academy.”

Drug experts say cocaine or its metabolites typically can show up on a blood or saliva test for up to 2 days, a urine test for up to 3 days and a hair test for months or even years.

Police have not yet identified the cadets and West Point did not return repeated calls for comment. It’s not immediately clear what disciplinary measures the cadets face, but illegal drug use can be grounds for immediate expulsion.

In 2001, three cadets at the Air Force Academy were caught doing drugs in a random drug test. Two were court-martialed and put in prison, the third resigned under pressure, and nine cadets were put on probation just for knowing about the drug use but not telling authorities.

Monge’s bust in 2016 involved five other cadets, including a defensive back on West Point’s famed football team, the Army Black Knights. Jared Rogers was not accused of selling drugs but he was addicted to pain pills. His crime was allowing a fellow cadet to use his car to bring drugs on campus.

Monge and Tevin Long, another West Point football player, were both court-martialed. Rogers avoided criminal charges but was given a dishonorable discharge.

Greg T. Rinkey, an attorney who specializes in military law and a former JAG (Army Judge Advocate General), has both prosecuted and defended soldiers, including West Point students, on everything from drug possession to murder.

Rinkey said the cadets will probably be “dis-enrolled” from the school, which is West Point-speak for “expelled.”

“It will depend on what defense counsel is going to spin,” Rinkey told The Post. “‘Fentanyl was in the brownies! They didn’t know!’ Or, ‘They thought they were smoking marijuana but fentanyl was in the joint.’ But if there are witnesses who say they saw [the cadets] buying and ingesting cocaine that’s something else altogether.”

West Point cadets are technically active-duty Army cadets and subject to being criminally charged, according to the UCMJ, or Uniform Code of Military Justice. They could also face a separate administrative action.

In a case like this one, Rinkey said, the usual process is that the Army’s Criminal Investigative Division (CID) will examine the case and present a report to the Superintendent of West Point, Lt. General Darryl

A. Williams, who is likely to make a final decision about how to proceed in consultation with an Army lawyer, or Judge Advocate.

If kicked out, they'll also have to pay back tuition. Schooling is normally free as long as students graduate and fulfill five years of military service.

"Uncle Sam is going to want his money back," Rinckey said.

Monge knows all about that. He was told he owed \$170,000 in tuition money after he was kicked out of West Point, a figure that's now jumped to over \$200,000 with interest. He said he recently got a notice asking him to pay \$5,000 a month toward his bill, which he said is impossible given his modest job as a salesman at a trucking company.

He hopes the cadets who overdosed avoid his fate.

"If West Point is open about it and understanding, they can treat it more like alcohol [abuse] and think in terms of rehab rather than just slamming the book at them," Monge told The Post.

"At the end of the day it's another college — but at other colleges students have a lot more freedom to test the same waters and make mistakes in judgment," Monge said. "It's just because West Point is this prestigious university held to a higher standard. How many students do you think are doing hard drugs at Penn State? Plenty."

A copy of a letter about the cadet overdoses in Florida, emailed to the school and its alumni on March 14 from Lt. General Williams, was obtained by The Post,

"Members of the Long Gray Line," the letter began. "As many of you know, the United States Military Academy has been working through a serious incident involving several Cadets. The health and safety of all our Cadets is my top concern and priority. I ask that you refrain from speculating or commenting on the details of any ongoing investigation.

"We will continue to support any ongoing investigation, and once completed, we will take appropriate action to ensure the health and safety of our Cadets and to maintain good order and discipline within the Corps. America looks to the Academy to develop leaders who embody the highest level of character. Character development is the most important thing we do here at the Academy. Good order and discipline are vitally important to our success. Therefore, illegal drugs of any kind have no place at West Point, in our Army, or in our Military."

Lucian Truscott IV, a 1969 graduate and legacy of West Point who wrote the 1978 classic "Dress Gray," said that alcohol and drug abuse have been rampant in the Army — and at West Point — for decades.

"The idea of these guys buying alleged cocaine with fentanyl doesn't surprise me at all," he said.

He was skeptical about Williams' letter and whether or not West Point would make any serious effort to combat drugs and alcohol on campus.

"'Character development' is something that's nice to do, but what they're doing at West Point is training people to kill people in wars," Truscott told The Post. "They don't give a f—k as long as you kill people. [Gen.] George Patton was terribly anti-Semitic. But they were fine with him as long as he was killing Nazis."

Monge said he was not subject to random drug tests during the academic year, only when he returned to school at the start of the year. Even so, he said, he kept a small shampoo-sized bottle of a friend's clean urine in a desk drawer that he could grab "if I got the call."

Fort Lauderdale fire and rescue officials initially reported that four people in the Florida spring break rental had taken a substance believed to be cocaine laced with fentanyl, and that two others were exposed to the fentanyl when they tried to administer life-saving CPR.

Four were hospitalized after a chaotic scene at the house.

“People are passing out. Three people passed out, because they drank a lot. Like a lot a lot,” the frantic 911 caller said as raised voices and commotion were heard in the background.

“They did some coke and they’ve been drinking heavily for the last couple days and they’re ...” he said, trailing off as he consoled a crying woman.

“We good. We good. We good. It’s okay baby, don’t worry about it,” he told her, as someone in the background was heard yelling “Hold it the f–k together.”

Cub Larkin, 46, who lives across the street from the house, said that drug ODs from fentanyl-laced drugs are not uncommon in Wilton Manors. There’s a waiting list to get Narcan, a prescription nasal spray used to reverse the effects of an overdose, he said, and many people keep a container in their homes and in the glove compartments of their cars.

Larkin told The Post that he has seen people overdose before but never with the “intensity” he witnessed the afternoon of March 11. He said he and his husband heard police sirens and went outside to see what was happening.

“I saw four people removed from house on stretches,” Larkin said. “I could have sworn that two of the young gentlemen were dead. What really sticks in my mind was how unresponsive they were. They were just flopping off the stretchers. I’ve never seen anyone so unconscious.”

An alleged supplier of cocaine was arrested on Saturday in connection with the tainted batch given the cadets after making a sale to an undercover officer. Axel Giovany Casseus, 21, is being held in lieu of \$50,000 bail.

Although his life didn’t take the route he had planned while at the school, Monge — who said he’s been clean since his hearing date of May 10, 2017, he was whisked off to prison — believes that what happened to him “was a blessing in disguise. I came to terms with why I was using and found God.”

But he fears the Army will throw the book at the cadets and they might end up labeled as felons “for the rest of their lives,” he said. “Meanwhile, there’s so many other people at West Point and elsewhere that do the same thing and get away with it.”

Truscott, however, doesn’t think the cadets will be expelled.

“If they kicked out everyone at West Point or in the army who abused alcohol and/or drugs,” he said, “we wouldn’t have an army or an academy.”

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HEADLINE	03/21 New Orleans police: 5 shootings in 10hrs
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/new-orleans-police-5-shootings-10-hours
GIST	<p>Police are investigating five shootings within a 10-hour span amid a deadly surge of gun violence.</p> <p>The recent spate of shootings have left three people dead, WWL-TV reported.</p> <p>The first shooting happened Wednesday evening, when police officers found a man dead inside a vehicle in the Central City neighborhood. Later Wednesday, a man was found lying in a street in New Orleans</p>

	<p>East and was pronounced dead of a gunshot wound. Then, shortly before dawn Thursday, a shooting on Lafron Drive left one person dead.</p> <p>Investigators are looking for a possible motive in each killing.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Austin SXSW festival shooting wounds 4
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/mar/20/shooting-wounds-4-at-south-by-southwest-festival-i/
GIST	<p>AUSTIN, Texas (AP) - Four people were shot and wounded in downtown Austin, Texas, early Sunday as the city hosts the annual South by Southwest festival, police said.</p> <p>The Austin Police Department told people to avoid the area at around 2:50 a.m., warning via Twitter that the gunman was still at large.</p> <p>However, police tweeted that a suspect was in custody shortly before 5 a.m.</p> <p>Police and the Austin-Travis County EMS said the victims' injuries were not life-threatening, and all four had been taken to the hospital.</p> <p>The coronavirus pandemic forced the SXSW festival to go virtual the last two years.</p> <p>In 2019, multiple shootings took place as the festival drew to a close, prompting Austin's police chief to pledge more security for the city's entertainment district.</p> <p>The weeklong arts and technology fest mixes tech, politics and entertainment. It started in 1987 as a small showcase for up-and-coming bands that turned into an international extravaganza, including movie premieres and performances from major artists.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Pakistan religion-fueled mobs on rise again
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/20/world/asia/pakistan-blasphemy-religious-violence.html
GIST	<p>KARACHI, Pakistan — Last month, a man named Muhammad Mushtaq was accused of burning pages of the Quran inside a mosque in central Pakistan. A mob armed with sticks, bricks and axes gathered at the mosque and dragged him out.</p> <p>Mr. Mushtaq was tortured for hours and eventually killed, his body hung from a tree. A handful of police officers were among those who watched.</p> <p>The Feb. 12 killing in the district of Khanewal was denounced across Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan said the government had “zero tolerance” for such mob violence and promised that the police officers would be punished.</p> <p>But lynchings over offenses to Islam, real or imagined, are far from new in Pakistan, where blasphemy is punishable by death. Rights activists say lynch mobs exploit anti-blasphemy laws to take matters into their own hands.</p> <p>In recent years these episodes have risen to an alarming level, with increasing cases of fatal violence.</p> <p>Critics and rights activists say that vows like those made by the prime minister are mere lip service and that Mr. Khan's government, much like his predecessors, has not taken any practical steps to curb violence.</p> <p>Instances of mob violence, and state-enforced criminal blasphemy cases, are more frequent in Pakistan than anywhere else, according to a report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.</p>

“The lack of political will and commitment has always stood as the biggest obstacle to prevent the abuse, misuse, and exploitation of blasphemy laws,” said Tahira Abdullah, a rights activist based in Islamabad.

Mr. Khan’s government is no different from its predecessors in promising to tackle the menace of religious violence, she said. But “it is too cowardly to confront” influential religious parties in Parliament, Ms. Abdullah said, “and the rampaging militant extremist groups outside Parliament.”

Blasphemy allegations have led to the vandalizing of Hindu temples and neighborhoods, the burning of police stations by angry mobs, the lynching of a student on a university campus and the killing of a provincial governor by his own security guard. After Musthaq’s killing, a senior police official told a parliamentary committee that 90 percent of those involved in blasphemy violence are between the ages of 18 and 30.

Just two months ago, a Sri Lankan, Priyantha Diyawadanage, was lynched by workers he oversaw in a factory in the eastern city of Sialkot. Mr. Diyawadanage was accused of tearing off stickers with religious inscriptions from the factory walls. He was tortured for hours by an enraged mob before his body was thrown off the factory’s rooftop, beaten and set on fire.

In 2021, at least 84 people faced blasphemy accusations in courts and from angry street mobs, according to the Centre for Social Justice, a Lahore-based minority rights group. Three people, including Mr. Diyawadanage, were killed by a mob over such allegations, it noted.

In August, a mob in the Rahimyar Khan district, also in Punjab Province, damaged statues and burned down a Hindu temple’s main door after a court released an 8-year-old Hindu boy on bail. He had been charged with blasphemy for allegedly urinating in the library of a madrasa.

Defense lawyers are also at risk. In 2014 gunmen murdered a Pakistani lawyer, Rashid Rehman, in Multan city for defending Junaid Hafeez, an academic charged with making derogatory comments about the Prophet Muhammad. Mr. Hafeez had been in prison, unable to find a lawyer, before Mr. Rehman agreed to take up his case.

In 2011, two politicians were murdered in similar episodes. Salman Taseer, then a provincial governor, was killed by a bodyguard after expressing opposition to blasphemy laws. Shahbaz Bhatti, a federal minister, was murdered for opposing the death sentence imposed on Asia Bibi, a Christian convicted of verbally insulting the Prophet Muhammad. Though Ms. Bibi was acquitted in 2019, she fled Pakistan and her lawyer has been receiving death threats.

“The increasing theocratization of Pakistan and rising militant extremism makes it very difficult for lawyers to defend alleged blasphemers,” Ms. Abdullah said. “It takes a great deal of personal courage and professional integrity to withstand huge overt pressure and threats.”

Law enforcement agencies are not trained, or equipped to handle, frenzied vigilante mobs, and find themselves overwhelmed, Ms. Abdullah noted.

Pakistan inherited 19th-century British laws outlining punishments for offenses related to blasphemy. But the government revamped these laws in the 1980s, introducing new clauses adding severe penalties and even a death sentence for anyone who insults Islam.

Iran, Brunei and Mauritania are the other three countries that impose the death penalty for insulting religion.

“Since the death penalty, a mandatory punishment for blasphemy, was made a law, there have been several bouts of religion-based violence in Pakistan,” said Peter Jacob, executive director of the Centre for Social Justice.

While no one has ever been executed for the offense, violence against alleged blasphemers is hardly unusual.

Rights activists link the current spike in blasphemy-related violence to the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, an emerging radical religious party. And Islamist parties and militant groups in Pakistan have been emboldened by the Taliban's coming to power in neighboring Afghanistan last year.

"The government's narrative about Islamophobia in the rest of the world" fuels the religion-based violence, Mr. Jacob said.

"This narrative builds on anger among the youth, which becomes ready-made ammunition for sporadic but large-scale violence against anyone who is suspected of offering any disrespect to religious persons, scripture, places or articles," he said.

Tehreek-e-Labbaik, the radical religious party, first came to prominence as an organized force when it demonstrated for the release of Mumtaz Qadri, the police bodyguard who fatally shot Governor Taseer in 2011. Mr. Qadri was eventually sentenced to death and hanged in 2016. Since then, it has shaped itself into a political party, contesting elections and continuing to unsettle governments.

In April last year, Tehreek-e-Labbaik organized violent, countrywide protests demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador after President Emmanuel Macron of France eulogized a French teacher murdered for showing caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad in a classroom.

The Pakistani Taliban have also announced support for anti-blasphemy campaigns and promoted armed struggle to protect the honor of Islam.

Posters offering a reward of some \$56,000 to kill Faraz Pervaiz, a Pakistani Christian, for posting anti-Islamic content on social media often appear in anti-blasphemy protests in the country.

Mr. Pervaiz, 34, now living in self-exile in Thailand, said that he started speaking out for the rights of non-Muslim communities on social media after a Muslim mob attacked a Christian neighborhood in Lahore in 2013, torching more than 150 houses and two churches following reports that a Christian sanitation worker had blasphemed the Prophet Muhammad.

"Even in Thailand, I feel insecure," he said in an interview, after a Pakistani Muslim refugee shared one of his videos and his location on social media. Mr. Pervaiz left the country in 2014 after receiving threats, he said.

Journalists in Pakistan have refrained from reporting on blasphemy cases since the rise of the extremist parties and their growing influence.

"Covering the issue of blasphemy as a journalist, and especially for the Urdu-language press, can either get you killed, or you'll be fired for jeopardizing the survival of the organization you work for," said Razeshta Sethna, a journalist and author of a recent report on the stifling media environment in the country.

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HEADLINE	03/20 Seattle homeless camp shooting; 1 dead
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/man-shot-killed-encampment-near-u-district/TLOLCS6UI5BT7F3ZZF2IKSOE5Y/
GIST	SEATTLE — Seattle Police are investigating after a man was shot and killed at an encampment in the University District Sunday. Police responded to the intersection of Seventh Avenue Northeast and Northeast 47th Street around 12:30 p.m. after receiving reports of a shooting.

	<p>Arriving officers reportedly found a man with a suspected gunshot wound.</p> <p>Officers and Seattle Fire Department medics attempted lifesaving measures, but the man died at the scene.</p> <p>Homicide detectives are now investigating this incident.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Houston party: 4 teens shot, 1 killed
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/4-teens-shot-1-killed-in-gunfire-at-houston-birthday-party/
GIST	<p>HOUSTON (AP) — A 17-year-old boy was killed and three other teens were wounded early Sunday when a fight broke out in a Houston parking lot during a birthday party and multiple people opened fire, authorities said.</p> <p>Two 17-year-old boys and a 14-year-old girl were wounded, the Harris County Sheriff's Office said. No suspects have yet been identified by investigators and it's not known what caused the fight, the office said.</p> <p>Authorities said one of the 17-year-old boys was hospitalized in critical condition while the other was released with minor injuries. The 14-year-old girl was treated at a hospital for injuries that weren't life threatening.</p> <p>A birthday party for a 16-year-old girl was taking place at a studio when the fight broke between several people in the parking lot, the sheriff's department said.</p> <p>A large number of spent shell casings were found in multiple areas of the parking lot following the shooting, authorities said.</p> <p>The 17-year-old boy who was released from the hospital with minor injuries was taken into custody on an unrelated aggravated robbery warrant, the sheriff's department said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 WSP: 'alarming' Pierce Co. shootings
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/article259605464.html
GIST	<p>March isn't over yet, but shootings on state highways in Pierce County are already approaching the total recorded through all of 2021, according to the Washington State Patrol.</p> <p>State troopers responded to two such incidents Sunday. That makes 23 highway shootings since the beginning of the year, said Trooper Robert Reyer, state patrol spokesman. The total number of highway shootings for all of 2021 was 31.</p> <p>"We can definitely notice a trend that is very alarming," Reyer said. "This is only troopers, too. That does not include Tacoma Police. It does not include the (Pierce County) Sheriff's Department. I hope this trend will end soon. It's bad."</p> <p>The first incident came at 4:42 p.m., when a 911 caller reported shots fired on the exit ramp from northbound I-5 to South 38th Street, Reyer said. A passenger in a white minivan, described as a man between 17 and 25, fired multiple shots at another vehicle.</p> <p>The shots hit the other vehicle, but the driver was not injured, Reyer said. The minivan continued onto 38th Street. Troopers and investigators were still searching for it Sunday evening. The exit ramp was closed for more than an hour.</p> <p>The second shooting, unrelated to the first, turned out to involve a BB gun. It was reported at 7:02 p.m. A caller said shots were fired into northbound traffic from a silver Honda Accord occupied by two people, headed south on Highway 161 (Meridian), at 120th Street East. No one was hurt.</p>

	<p>“All we know right now is the 911 caller reported the driver was brandishing a black handgun and started shooting into northbound traffic,” Reyer said Sunday evening.</p> <p>The Accord pulled into the parking lot of a Rite-Aid store at 128th Street, Reyer said. The driver, a 31-year-old woman also identified as the shooter, left the car and entered the store. The passenger, a 23-year-old man, stayed in the car. State troopers reached the scene, and arrested both people.</p> <p>Investigators found the BB gun in the center console of the Accord. The woman was arrested on suspicion of DUI, Reyer said. While the gun turned out to be a BB gun, Reyer still counts the incident in the county’s overall tally.</p> <p>“We are still counting it as a shooting incident,” he said. “A BB gun can still hurt somebody and cause damage.”</p> <p>A third reported highway shooting incident at Thorne Lane in Lakewood turned out to be a false alarm, Reyer said.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Battle rages on over police funding
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/crimes-rise-battles-rage-police-funding/story?id=83392650
GIST	<p>When President Joe Biden said "the answer" to nationwide crime surges was to fund police, he reignited intense debate on defunding police departments.</p> <p>"The answer," Biden said in his State of the Union speech on March 1, "is not to defund the police. The answer is to fund the police. Fund them with resources and training they need to protect our communities."</p> <p>With that, more are taking deeper looks into whether funding can be effective at lowering crime rates. But some advocates who spoke with ABC News continue to wonder whether defunding police departments and shifting monies to efforts like mental health service and youth programs is the ideal, multi-pronged approach to combating rising crime.</p> <p>Across the country, major cities are contending with disturbing increases in crime rates.</p> <p>For example, New York City saw a 38.5% increase in overall crime when comparing January 2020 to January 2021 and Philadelphia's homicide rate in 2022 is beginning to outpace the dangerous, record-high numbers of 2021.</p> <p>And when crime rises, political leaders typically focus on increasing police budgets -- a Wall Street Journal report found that about half of the top 20 largest U.S. police jurisdictions proposed police funding increases in their 2022 budgets.</p> <p>However, after the racial reckoning of the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd by former Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin, some called for "defunding" the police.</p> <p>Those who advocate for defunding police say that funds from police departments should be reallocated toward other programs that address community issues like poverty, housing and more.</p> <p>Those who are against defunding the police say that reducing funding will worsen crime and leave police departments without the resources to do their jobs efficiently.</p> <p>"Without the police, you're left with ... no line of defense between innocent people and the potential for lawlessness," said Jim Pasco, the executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police.</p> <p>Facts about police department funding</p>

Nationally, \$115 billion is spent each year on policing, according to the [criminal justice research and policy organization Vera](#).

The vast majority of police funding -- an estimated 80% - 95% of a department's total budget -- goes to personnel, according to [the International Association of Chiefs of Police](#).

This means that most money goes toward putting police on the street.

"One of the largest expenditures of any police department is their payroll," said Pasco. "It's getting those officers hired and trained, out on the street -- it's an extraordinarily expensive undertaking."

Spending also goes toward equipment (like gear and patrol cars), operational costs (like uniforms and office supplies), and the funding of community programs.

Police agencies across the country reported to the [Police Executive Research Forum](#) that hiring has stalled or decreased, while resignations and retirements have increased.

Those who advocate for defunding police say this proves money allocated to personnel should go elsewhere, while others say it shows more money is needed to better train and retain good police officers. "You need money to hire people," Pasco said. "You need money to recruit qualified people, hire them, train them and put them out on the street and put them to work."

Others say funding to get police back on the streets isn't worth it because the job has become almost impossible to recruit for.

Eugene O'Donnell, a former NYPD officer and lecturer at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, says police are forced to work longer and take on dangerous situations with less backup due to the poor retention and hiring rates.

"You're simply not going to get humans to put on police uniforms, especially in places where they would be needed the most. They're not going to go near the job now," O'Donnell said. "The people that will want the job will be scary."

As a result, he says departments -- those provided with more funding or not -- are extraordinarily stretched.

To fund or defund: Measuring which is more successful

Factors like falling crime, fewer violent or harmful police interactions and successful community programs are just a few of the considerations for some experts to consider that expanded police funding is a productive tactic.

But others, including Sakira Cook, senior director of the justice reform program at The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, says that investing in an increased police presence and funding is not the way to go.

"For decades, policymakers have pushed tough-on-crime policies that have not made us safer, but only wreaked havoc and destroyed lives -- particularly in Black and Brown communities, while costing us billions," Cook said.

She says that tough-on-crime officials have often implemented strict criminal codes, long prison sentences and expanded police power on the streets.

A [University of Dayton Law Review](#) study said it found that these kinds of policies did not reduce crime rates. Research [in the Police Journal](#) also failed to find a relationship between increased police presence and crime deterrence.

A [National Bureau of Economic Research](#) study found that additional officers can translate to fewer homicides -- but can lead to more arrests for low-level offenses.

Hans Menos, the vice president of Law Enforcement Initiatives for the Center for Policing Equity says that these laws and funded efforts don't fix the roots of crime -- poor local infrastructure, accessibility to community programs and services, etc.

"I vastly prefer conversations on funding and resources that talk about systems of care, like community development ... all the other things that have been neglected in favor of systems of punishment," Menos told ABC News.

However, some departments have shifted resources and now fund mental and behavioral health professionals who can respond to lower-level calls. This, proponents say, reduces pressure on the police, reduces community contact with police and eases the burden on the criminal justice system.

"Many people have started these alternate responder programs with great success," Menos said.

He added: "The programs that take social services and embed them within police departments are successful because it's taking the idea of a first responder and recognizing that it needs to be a whole lot more specialized and needs to be a lot more responsive to community concerns."

How funded and defunded police departments measure up

Some of the most well-funded departments in the country -- many of which increased their budgets in 2021, including [Baltimore, Maryland](#) and [Washington, D.C.](#), -- saw a rise in violent crimes. However, a few have seen major decreases, like in Wilmington, Delaware.

Several of the departments that have reduced their budgets, including Portland, Oregon, and San Francisco have also seen spikes in crime.

Some of the departments that cut their budgets invested in mental health responders to low-level or non-violent calls.

Many of these programs are relatively new, so it's difficult to measure long-term success.

The complexities of the current state of policing in the U.S. has experts disagreeing on whether more funding or less funding is "the answer."

"To make this investment in our communities, we must shrink the footprint of the criminal-legal system in our lives, by sizing budgets and shifting resources away from solely criminalization and incarceration toward investments in social programs and services," Cook said.

Some think the police are no longer the public safety tool of choice with the way they are currently functioning.

"The police profession at this point is beyond repair," O'Donnell said. "And we would be better off figuring out other ways to secure the public. "

Some say otherwise.

"The vast majority of Americans want to be want to feel safe in their homes and in their churches and their schools and their transportation systems," Pasco said. "It sometimes takes police officers to ensure that that is a possibility."

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HEADLINE	03/20 Belgium: car drives thru parade; kills 6
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/car-crashes-into-carnival-in-belgium-strepy-bracquegnies

GIST	<p>A car drove at high speed into a group of Belgian carnival performers who were preparing a parade early on Sunday, killing six people and seriously injuring 10 others, authorities have said, adding that the incident did not appear to be a militant attack.</p> <p>“At this stage, there are no elements to suggest that the attack had a terrorist motive,” the prosecutor Damien Verheyen told a news conference. Police denied media reports that the car was involved in a high-speed chase.</p> <p>The incident occurred in the southern Belgium village of Strépy-Bracquegnies at about 4am GMT.</p> <p>Jacques Gobert, the mayor of the neighbouring town of La Louvière, said between 150 and 200 people were gathered in preparation for the annual folklore parade, involving costumes and drums, when the vehicle appeared.</p> <p>“A speeding car drove into the crowd ... The driver then continued on his way,” said Gobert.</p> <p>The two people in the car, which was later intercepted, were detained. Police said they were local people in their 30s and were not previously known to them.</p> <p>Belgium has sought to root out people suspected of militant links over the past seven years. A Brussels-based Islamic State cell was involved in attacks on Paris in 2015 that killed 130 people and on Brussels in 2016 in which 32 died.</p> <p>Ramming vehicles into crowds has become more common as a weapon used by militants in Europe and white supremacists in the US because such attacks are inexpensive, easy to organise and hard for authorities to prevent, experts say.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 WSP investigates I-5 drive-by shooting
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/wsp-investigating-drive-by-shooting-on-nb-i-5-and-sr-18
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. - Washington State Patrol is investigating a drive-by shooting that occurred in Tacoma Saturday night.</p> <p>State patrol says the shooting occurred on northbound I-5 and SR 18 around 10:45 p.m.</p> <p>A person in a red VW GTI said a white Dodge Charger with a black fin on the truck fired several shots at their car. No one was injured.</p> <p>WSP recovered six bullet casings and one bullet from the area. Anyone with information is asked to call state patrol.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Petty thieves plague San Francisco
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/crime-san-francisco-petty-thieves-small-businesses-11647797642?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO—Terry Asten Bennett’s family has been running Cliff’s Variety Store since 1936. In all that time, they’ve never experienced the amount of burglaries and property damage that they have recently, Ms. Bennett said.</p> <p>Thieves smashed a display window and broke down a door to steal items as small as spray paint, and people shattered glass doors on two occasions for no apparent reason.</p> <p>“These last two years have been insane,” she said. “It used to be a rare occurrence.”</p>

Although violent crime in San Francisco is lower than in many other major U.S. cities, business owners, residents and visitors here are dealing with a rash of thefts, burglaries and car break-ins.

Among the 25 largest U.S. cities, San Francisco has had the highest property-crime rate in four of the most recent six years for which data is available, bucking the long-term national decline in such crimes that began in the 1990s. Property crimes declined in San Francisco during the first year of the pandemic, but rose 13% in 2021. Burglaries in the city are at their highest levels since the mid-1990s. There were 20,663 thefts from vehicles last year—almost 57 a day—a 39% increase from the prior year, although still below the record of 31,398 in 2017, according to the police.

Smashed storefronts are so common that the city launched a program to fix them with public money. Car owners leave notes declaring there is nothing of value in their vehicles, or leave their windows open to save themselves from broken glass. Videos of shoplifters hauling goods out of drugstores such as Walgreens have gone viral, and a smash-and-grab robbery by 20 to 40 people at a Louis Vuitton store last November made the national news.

Owners of small businesses say the costs of security and repairs are eating into profits already diminished by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the Castro, the neighborhood where Cliff's is located, shops have recorded nearly 100 instances of smashed windows and doors that cost \$170,000 to repair since the beginning of 2020, according to the neighborhood's merchant association.

Criminologists say San Francisco's high density of retail stores and its mix of tourists, commuters and wealthy residents have made it an inviting target for thieves. Locals point to a host of other factors that may be exacerbating the problem, including the tactics of the police and prosecutors, statewide changes intended to reduce the number of people behind bars, and the city's dual crises of drug use and homelessness. There has been no end of finger-pointing.

Despite the city's long history of progressive politics, some business owners and residents are demanding that political leaders shift to a more law-and-order approach.

District Attorney Chesa Boudin, who took office in 2020 as part of the national "progressive prosecutor" movement and has de-emphasized the prosecution of low-level offenses, will face a recall election in June.

"Nothing is more important than to make sure that people who live in this city, people who work in the city, people who visit San Francisco, feel safe," Democratic Mayor London Breed said at a news conference last month. "The fact is, that does require police officers."

Some former police officials and business owners blame Mr. Boudin's focus on keeping people who commit small-scale crimes out of prison. His office, for example, discourages filing charges in cases where suspects are pulled over for traffic infractions and officers find small amounts of drugs. Others point the finger at the police, who cleared just 6% of the city's property crimes in 2020, more than 8 percentage points lower than the national average. A case is considered cleared if a suspect is arrested, charged and turned over to a court for prosecution, or is identified with sufficient evidence for a charge but can't be taken into custody for circumstances beyond police control.

Some business owners say the city's large population of people living on the streets and using drugs such as fentanyl is a big factor in the small-scale thefts. Law-enforcement officials, though, say they suspect organized crews of petty criminals are carrying out a large portion of them.

Police Chief Bill Scott has deployed more officers to tourist spots such as Fisherman's Wharf to stop car break ins, and to retail shopping districts to stop thefts and burglaries. He has beefed up his retail theft investigations unit.

Businesses have been affected in every corner of San Francisco, even traditionally low-crime areas such as the Sunset District, where commercial and residential burglaries rose 80% in between 2019 and 2021.

Michael Hsu's Footprint shoe store got broken into for the first time in February 2021. The thief used a blowtorch to crack the glass door without setting off the alarm and took tens of thousands of dollars worth of high-end North Face jackets. More people arrived soon after, taking whatever they could grab before they set off the alarm.

Mr. Hsu, who grew up in the Sunset, said he recalled thinking: "Oh, they finally got me."

Mr. Hsu was the first recipient in the new grant program for small businesses to fix their storefronts. Three weeks later, his store was hit again, this time by a thief who climbed up scaffolding, broke in through a second-story window and made off with several boxes of shoes.

He now equips his employees with pepper spray and a key fob that calls the police directly. He upgraded his security system and is putting money aside for other antitheft measures.

The grant program has distributed more than \$500,000 to nearly 400 businesses to fix their storefronts.

Sharky Laguana, who is president of the city's small business commission and runs the van-rental company Bandago, said thieves frequently smash his vehicles' windows and steal his customers' belongings. "It gives customers a bad experience, it costs them a lot of money and it costs us a lot of money," he said.

Police and prosecutors say the majority of car break-ins are committed by organized crews. Mr. Laguana grew so frustrated he launched a reward program for information that leads to busts of big fencing operations that buy merchandise from such thieves. He thought he would be able to raise tens of thousands of dollars at best; he got \$250,000 in pledges from rental-car companies and other businesses.

The day after the Louis Vuitton smash-and-grab robbery, San Francisco police deployed a mobile command center that still sits across the street from the luxury-goods store. The department sent more foot patrols to the Union Square retail district, pulling officers from all over the city, said Captain Julian Ng who oversees the area.

"It's a resource drain, but if I had my way, we'd do this forever because it's such an important area for the city," said Capt. Ng.

Five people were arrested in connection with the Louis Vuitton incident. Captain Ng said there are many reasons for the city's overall low rate of clearing property-crime cases, including the department's no-chase policy for misdemeanors and nonviolent felonies, which aims to reduce unnecessary accidents. Car break-in crews can easily zip away in their own vehicles without police cars chasing them, he said.

Some former police officials said in interviews that officers don't feel it is worth making an arrest in low-level cases because they assume the district attorney won't file charges. They also point to a statewide ballot measure passed in 2014—Proposition 47—that raised the dollar amount at which theft can be prosecuted as a felony from \$400 to \$950.

Mr. Boudin, a former public defender, said his office hasn't changed the way it prosecutes property crimes from the previous district attorney, George Gascon, who is now district attorney in Los Angeles and facing his own recall campaign. The office's rate of filing charges against people arrested for burglaries and thefts dipped to 41% in Mr. Boudin's first year in office, but increased to 58% in 2021, similar to the rate during Mr. Gascon's tenure.

Mr. Boudin has pointed the finger back at the police, arguing that the certainty of arrest is low in San Francisco compared with other cities. More consistent arrests of criminals, he has said, would be a more powerful deterrent than the length of prison sentences.

Last November, officers were caught on a surveillance camera sitting in a squad car, watching as burglars made off with stolen product from a cannabis dispensary. The department is investigating the incident.

Lt. Scott Ryan, who heads a unit that investigates property crimes, said clearance rates aren't a good measure because police often nab serial offenders who they believe to be responsible for far more burglaries or thefts than they can prove.

He said consequences aren't severe enough for repeat offenders. Police investigators have a list of 48 people arrested five or more times for burglaries in recent years, he said, and more than half of them are no longer behind bars. "There's got to be a line in the sand," he said.

In February, Ms. Bennett, the owner of Cliff's Variety, received an email alert that angered her. The burglar who broke into her store to steal spray paint and gloves was being released from jail, it said.

Charles Andrews, who was convicted in the burglary, was getting out of jail after 244 days. It was the second time that Mr. Andrews had been arrested for breaking into Cliff's, the first coming in 2017.

The other burglar, who smashed a \$4,500 display window to steal a \$200 emergency kit, was never caught.

Sylvia Cediell, a public defender who represented Mr. Andrews, said his repeated arrests "reflect the circumstances of his life—primarily extreme poverty." Mr. Andrews has been homeless since he came to the Bay Area more than a decade ago, she said, and his time in jail has been the only time he has spent off the streets. Ms Cediell said the city needs to do a better job addressing poverty and lack of housing.

Ms. Bennett said she believes the worsening drug problem within San Francisco's homeless population has led to thefts and some of the property damage at Cliff's. Last year, Mayor Breed declared a state of emergency because of overdoses in the city's Tenderloin neighborhood.

In an effort to deter shoplifters, Ms. Bennett now stations employees at the door to greet customers. She installed a camera system and gave employees walkie-talkies so they could monitor shoplifters and confront them before they leave the store. Shoplifting losses have since dropped from 2% to 1% percent of annual sales, she said.

The increase in burglaries, which often involves breaking into closed shops, may be driven in part by emptier streets during the pandemic, police and criminologists say.

Ms. Bennett, whose great-great-grandfather Hilario DeBaca started the business, said the increase in crime hasn't made her consider closing Cliff's, which she said is woven into the neighborhood. But the break-ins are eating into the store's bottom line.

New metal gates to protect the entrances plus repairs from the two burglaries and shattered door totaled about \$22,000, less than half of which was covered by insurance, she said. She is applying to the city grant program to fix the most recently shattered door.

"When you're a small-business owner, you spend more hours at work than at home, so you take it very personally when someone attacks you," she said. "Whether it's an attack on you or just your building, it really doesn't matter. It feels the same."

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HEADLINE	03/19 Public defender: Seattle CAO plan 'tired'
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-city-attorneys-plan-for-repeat-offenders-is-tired-and-destabilizing-public-defender-says/
GIST	In an effort to address repeat offenders, the Seattle City Attorney's Office has identified 118 people suspected of committing more than 2,400 alleged misdemeanors in the last five years.

City Attorney Ann Davison, who was [elected in November](#) on promises to quell the [city's rising crime rate](#), announced this week that the criminal division of her office — which prosecutes misdemeanors referred by the Seattle Police Department — would focus on working with the King County prosecuting attorney to aggregate misdemeanors into felony charges, as well as coordinating social services and finding other solutions to remove people from “cycles of crime.”

According to a release from Davison’s office, 118 people referred to the city attorney for charges at least 12 times over the last five years, including at least once in the last eight months, have been identified under the new High Utilizer Initiative.

“To me, that means nothing really meaningfully was done for that individual. They were overlooked and ignored for too long, and fell through the social safety nets of the criminal justice system,” Davison said Tuesday. “And so now, by coordinating and linking efforts, we can make sure that we disrupt that cycle of crime for these people and intervene and make sure we are putting together a plan to set them up for success.”

The referrals for the 118 people include more than 2,400 separate potential charges, primarily theft (1,019 charges), trespassing (589), assault (409) and weapons violations (101), according to Davison’s office.

Charges of driving under the influence and domestic violence are handled separately and not included.

Davison said Tuesday that her office is working with local partners including the King County prosecuting attorney — who prosecutes felonies — to identify ways to disrupt patterns of repeated crime, including by encouraging aggregate felonies, a method of combining multiple lesser charges into felonies, at the discretion of the county prosecutor.

“For example, we have a person that has been engaged in repeated criminal activity in the North End of Seattle, daily involved in stealing from retailers and, in the process, harassing and threatening employees every day, sometimes multiple times in one day,” Davison said of one “high utilizer,” who had 18 misdemeanor referrals to her office over the last five years.

According to a spokesperson for Davison, the defendant is now in custody on suspicion of felony theft, made possible by outstanding warrants, expedited case filings and multiple cases aggregated as felonies.

“And so by communicating with King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office and coordinating with the Seattle Police Department, we’ve been able to aggregate those and make sure we get that person not committing those crimes any longer,” Davison said.

“We know that the community wants immediate action that holds prolific offenders accountable, and we’ll keep going to court each day with a focus on preserving public safety and supporting victims,” King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg said in a written statement. “The challenge for the municipal court, and for our community, is finding resources to help address the root causes of the behavioral health problems that are leading a small number of people to be frequent utilizers of the court system.”

In addition to finding charges that result in more jail time, Davison says the new initiative and increased communication with other agencies will help provide addiction treatment and other social services to people to help keep them out of the legal system permanently.

“Then, making sure at the conclusion of that, that there is coordination with service providers with accountability in there to make sure it is not a return to the cycle of crime, but it is really meaningfully intervening for that person’s life,” Davison said.

[At an event Thursday sponsored by the Downtown Seattle Association](#), Davison and King County Regional Homelessness Authority CEO Marc Dones discussed the importance of nonpunitive responses to crime and homelessness.

“I do very much agree that there does have to be some role right for the criminal legal system. But the question — and we talked a lot about this — is where is the handoff to the stuff that we do?” said Dones, whose agency provides housing and supportive services. “And that is not tight right now.”

King County Public Defender Anita Khandelwal echoed a call for services Friday, but also said that Davison’s program is neither a new idea nor the best approach.

After Davison’s announcement, Khandelwal’s office tweeted a thread criticizing the initiative and comparing it to the city’s similar High Impact Offender program in 2012 and [High Barrier Individuals Work Group](#) formed in 2019.

“The High Utilizers Initiative appears to be the same program reheated from 2012 and 2019,” Khandelwal said Friday. “The only guaranteed outcome of this initiative, and of any criminal legal system-based initiative, is racial disproportionality and continued cycling of individuals through a system that is harmful, expensive and ineffective.”

Davison’s efforts also reflect a broader tone among city officials, mirroring not only her early pledge to focus on [timely prosecution of higher level charges](#), but also promises by Mayor Bruce Harrell to [address high-crime areas of the city with swift police intervention and social services](#).

In the tweet thread, the public defender called Davison’s effort “tired,” noting the cost of incarceration — about \$200 per night, or \$6,000 a month — and suggesting, instead, more robust housing efforts by the city.

“Anyone who works in downtown Seattle or has recently visited it knows that the state of emergency extends well beyond any particular 50 to 100 people; addressing the lack of services in Seattle will require imaginative solutions that extend well beyond the generation of lists of people who suffer from those problems,” she added Friday in an email.

Khandelwal also rebuffed the practice of aggregating, calling it “costly and ineffective,” predicting that it would “only worsen outcomes for the individuals prosecuted, who will leave jail or prison with their lives further destabilized, and for our community at large.”

Instead, she favors divesting from legal intervention to meet the service needs of those frequenting the system.

“Addressing the State of Emergency of Homelessness involves building housing — and divesting resources from the criminal legal system in order to build enough housing for everyone in our community,” Khandelwal said. “Addressing the Public Health Crisis of Racism similarly requires focusing on policies and programs that improve outcomes for BIPOC individuals and divesting from those, like the criminal legal system, that are known to disproportionately harm them,” she said referring to Black, Indigenous and people of color.

According to Davison, 16 of the 118 repeat offenders were in custody as of Tuesday.

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HEADLINE	03/19 DNA cold cases arrest; 47yr-old Elk man
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/dna-cold-cases-47-year-old-elk-man-arrested-home-invasions-rapes/MVJQAKUVV5DS3BID2CWLC7JCFE/
GIST	PULLMAN, Wash. — A 47-year-old Elk man was working at a construction site in Spokane when law enforcement arrested him for several home invasions and sexual assaults that happened in Pullman between November 2003 and March 2004.

	<p>According to a release from Pullman police, evidence collected when the crimes occurred matched DNA profiles that were found through familial genealogy sources, which investigators linked to Kenneth Downing.</p> <p>That link came after a relative of Downing sent in a sample to learn more about their family tree, The Associated Press reported.</p> <p>Downing was booked into the Whitman County Jail on Thursday and faced a judge on Friday.</p> <p>He has been charged with four counts of rape, three counts of assault, three counts of unlawful imprisonment with sexual motivation and other charges, according to The Associated Press.</p> <p>Prosecutors argued Downing was a threat to the public and his bail was set at \$5 million.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Parkland shooting; 15yr-old dead
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/15-year-old-killed-parkland-shooting/281-3677af2a-c5e1-460e-9355-f1f42351471a
GIST	<p>PARKLAND, Wash. — A 15-year-old boy was killed Saturday night in a shooting in Parkland, according to the Pierce County Sheriff's Department.</p> <p>The Pierce County Sheriff's Department said South Sound 911 dispatchers received multiple calls of shots being fired at the Heatherstone Apartments in Parkland around 8:45 p.m.</p> <p>Arriving deputies reportedly found the 15-year-old victim dead inside an apartment. The Pierce County Sheriff's Department said witnesses told deputies an adult man who had also been shot left in a vehicle.</p> <p>Pierce County sheriff's detectives and forensic investigators were at the scene.</p> <p>The Pierce County Sheriff's Department said there are no suspects in custody. The investigation is ongoing.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Another violent weekend in Baltimore
SOURCE	https://foxbaltimore.com/news/city-in-crisis/13-shot-4-killed-as-explosive-violence-continues-for-another-weekend
GIST	<p>BALTIMORE (WBFF) — Rising violence continues into another weekend in Baltimore City.</p> <p>From Friday to Saturday 12 were shot, 5 were killed.</p> <p>Someone was shot statistically every 2 and 1/2 hours last Saturday, a day that saw fewer survivors. 9 shootings, 7 killed.</p> <p>In Baltimore's Patterson Park Saturday there was a celebration of life and an honoring of loss.</p> <p>A bilingual ceremony was held for victims claimed by COVID, and what couldn't be avoided, how many have also lost their lives to preventable gun violence in the city.</p> <p>For faith leaders who spoke at the event, it's what remains a flood of deadly violence and the question, what to do about it?</p> <p>"The religious community the political community and families begin to have some dialogue about resolution can take place how we can resolve our conflict, it's starts with the family," said Charlie Taylor.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/19 Rash pot shop robberies Washington state
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/a-rash-of-pot-shop-robberies-in-wa-state-suspected-robber-killed-at-covington-store
GIST	<p>We're learning more about an attempted robbery at Euphorium pot shop in Covington in King County. A would-be robber was shot dead there Thursday night.</p> <p>And an employee who happens to be the ID checker at the front door is now being called a hero.</p> <p>It was 7:45 pm when a young man in his late teens or early 20s tried to rob this pot shop, according to police.</p> <p>King County sheriff's detectives are still investigating.</p> <p>On Friday, KOMO News heard from the Director of Operations at Euphorium about what led up to the fatal shooting.</p> <p>"One of our employees was on break in his car. He exited his car and was walking back toward the store. A gentleman came up behind him out of the dark, grabbed him in a headlock and put a gun to his head and started walking him down here to the front door," said Ryan Evans with Euphorium. "Our ID checker confirmed that with him. He said 'yes, are you serious, you are robbing us right now? This is a robbery.' He put his attention to our security guard. And our ID checker drew his gun and fired."</p> <p>Evans said the man who shot and killed the suspected robber, works at the pot dispensary as an ID checker at the front door. That same employee also works for Rehv Arms, which is right next door to the marijuana dispensary. That employee has a concealed carry permit and carries a gun, according to Evans.</p> <p>The two employees involved in the attempted robbery are both taking some time off.</p> <p>Evans says he wants everyone to know the ID checker is a hero.</p> <p>None of the other employees or customers inside the store were ever hurt.</p> <p>The Cannabis Professionals Network told KOMO News there have been 77 pot store robberies so far this year in Washington state. About 90 percent of them have involved a gun.</p>
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HEADLINE	03/18 Street takeovers, racing hit Tacoma streets
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/frustrated-citizens-say-they-feel-helpless-as-street-racing-takes-over-tacoma-streets
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — When David Longwell left his house to pick up some food and traffic hit a standstill, he figured there had been another crash on E. Portland Ave. in Tacoma.</p> <p>It turns out dozens of drivers had taken over an intersection to spin donuts – a problem that has popped up yet again.</p> <p>"I called 911 and basically 911 is apologizing about it," Longwell said. "They're like, 'there's nothing we can do. We're sorry.'"</p> <p>So he waited and watched. He then took out his phone to record what was happening. At one point, he said a man threatened him with a gun.</p> <p>"People just don't care," Longwell said. "Nobody cares. You're on your own here."</p>

For more than an hour, he tells KOMO News up to 40 drivers took turns drifting. His video shows some people hanging out of the cars as they spin in circles with spectators watching close by. The takeover had traffic backed up all the way to I-5 from E. 48th St.

"They had cars parked all the way across the street," Longwell said. "You couldn't go anywhere."

Frustrated with the fact that no law enforcement showed up, Longwell is now calling on politicians and police to do their jobs.

"Does somebody have to die to get any response?" Longwell said. "To get anyone from the city to come and do anything? The only time we see anybody is when they have their hands out and want more money or more votes. Besides that, we don't see them, we don't hear from them. You take this and move it to a different part of the city, you'll have a response immediately."

KOMO News has highlighted the ongoing problem of street racing and street takeovers for more than a year. In September of 2020, hundreds of people swarmed the streets outside of the Space Needle and drifted for nearly two hours. Last summer, the Washington State Patrol, along with other area law enforcement agencies, announced the formation of a Street Racing Task Force.

In November of last year, the Pierce County Council passed an anti-street racing ordinance known as "Stay Out of Areas of Racing Order," or SOAR as the council has called it. If a person is busted, they could be arrested and have their car impounded for 15 days for the first offense. A second strike would land a 30-day impound.

According to WSP, when troopers or officers have shown up to break up the crowds, they're often outnumbered and have been threatened, too. With warmer weather on the way, the agency sent the following statement to KOMO News:

"The Washington State Patrol understands that as the weather gets nicer there may be more planned events. Our plan as it always has been in addressing the dangerous and illegal activity of Street Racing, Takeovers and all that comes with it is to continue to work with our partners from the local cities and counties that are affected by this. We will all continue to work together to arrest the organizers and those that participate and attend."

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HEADLINE	03/19 Tacoma: 1 killed during pot shop robbery
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/at-least-one-killed-during-robbery-of-tacoma-marijuana-shop-police-say
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — Police in Tacoma were investigating after a victim, believed to be a worker at a marijuana shop, was fatally shot during a robbery Saturday evening, police said.</p> <p>It was at least the second fatal shooting at a marijuana dispensary in as many days in Western Washington.</p> <p>The incident occurred after 10 p.m. at the World of Weed, located in the 3200 block of Portland Ave. E., a spokesperson for the Tacoma Police Department said.</p> <p>The victim, who was not immediately identified, was rushed to a local hospital with a gunshot wound but later died.</p> <p>Police did not immediately say if any arrests have been made in connection with the incident or if anyone else was hurt during the robbery.</p> <p>The fatal shooting comes after a would-be robber was shot Thursday at a King County marijuana shop.</p> <p>Authorities have said a worker at a Covington weed shop on Thursday shot and killed a suspect who was trying to hold up the Euphorium pot shop.</p>

HEADLINE	03/20 Arkansas car show gunfire: 1 killed, 24 hurt
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/19/us/arkansas-car-show-shooting/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)One person was killed and at least 24 were wounded in Dumas, Arkansas, Saturday night, when "gunfire swept across a crowd attending a local car show," the Arkansas State Police said.</p> <p>One suspect is in custody, ASP said in a news release Sunday, but authorities are still searching for others investigators suspect fired into the crowd just after 7 p.m. CT (8 p.m. ET).</p> <p>Officials initially reported as many as 10 people were wounded, citing preliminary information soon after the shooting.</p> <p>The investigation remains ongoing. Special Agents from ASP's Criminal Investigation Division interviewed victims and witnesses overnight, the release said. Investigators secured the scene, which sits along US Highway 65 as it goes through the center of Dumas, ASP said.</p> <p>The car show was hosted by the Hood-Nic Foundation and Delta Neighborhood Empowerment Organization, a group providing educational programs and support for Dumas-area youth, according to their website. Dumas is about 80 miles southeast of Little Rock.</p> <p>According to Delta N.E.Y.O website, the annual Hood-Nic, (Neighborhood Picnic) of which the car show has been a part for 16 years, takes place annually over spring break weekend to raise funds for "scholarships, school supplies, and more to deserving individuals."</p> <p>"We are heartbroken and in shock at what took place during tonight's car show," the Hood-Nic Foundation said in a Facebook post Saturday night.</p> <p>"The purpose of Hood-Nic has always been to bring the community together," the post said. "This senseless violence needs to end. Sending our prayers."</p>
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HEADLINE	03/20 Seattle police: deadly stabbing Capitol Hill
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/seattle-police-investigating-capitol-hill-stabbing
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Seattle Police are investigating a stabbing in Capitol Hill early Saturday morning.</p> <p>Officers were called to reports of a man shouting near 13th Ave E and Denny Way. When they arrived, they found a man with a stab wound. He was taken to Harborview Medical Center for treatment of life-threatening injuries.</p> <p>Police confirm the man died at the hospital.</p> <p>No suspect has been identified yet.</p>
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